



BHAVAN'S BOOK UNIVERSITY

.....

**ON A
FORBIDDEN FLIGHT**

Satyanarayan Sinha

GENERAL EDITORS

**K. M. MUNSHI
N. CHANDRASEKHARA AIYER**

.....



BHARATIYA VIDYA BHAVAN, BOMBAY

What Bharatiya Vidya Stands for

1. Bharatiya Shiksha must ensure that no promising young Indian of character having faith in Bharata and her culture Bharatiya Vidya should be left without modern educational equipment by reason merely of want of funds.

2. Bharatiya Shiksha must be formative more than informative, and cannot have for its end mere acquisition of knowledge. Its legitimate sphere is not only to develop natural talents but so to shape them as to enable them to absorb and express the permanent values of Bharatiya Vidya.

3. Bharatiya Shiksha must take into account not only the full growth of a student's personality but the totality of his relations and lead him to the highest self-fulfilment of which he is capable.

4. Bharatiya Shiksha must involve at some stage or other an intensive study of Sanskrit or Sanskritic languages and their literature, without excluding, if so desired, the study of other languages and literature, ancient and modern.

5. The re-integration of Bharatiya Vidya, which is the primary object of Bharatiya Shiksha, can only be attained through a study of forces, movements, motives, ideas, forms and art of creative life-energy through which it has expressed itself in different ages as a single continuous process.

6. Bharatiya Shiksha must stimulate the student's power of expression, both written and oral, at every stage in accordance with the highest ideals attained by the great literary masters in the intellectual and moral spheres.

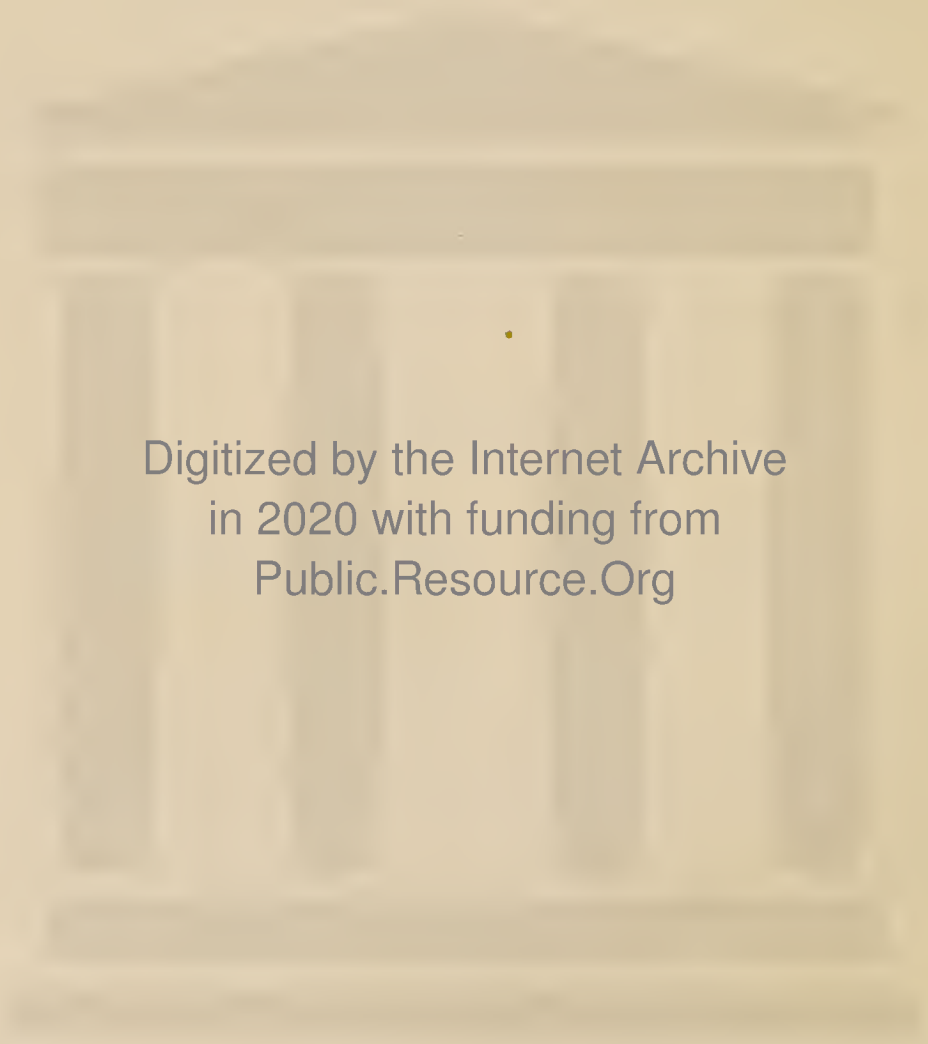
7. The technique of Bharatiya Shiksha must involve—

- (a) the adoption by the teacher of the *Guru* attitude which consists in taking a personal interest in the student; inspiring and encouraging him to achieve distinction in his studies; entering into his life with a view to form ideals and remove psychological obstacles; and creating in him a spirit of consecration; and
- (b) the adoption by the student of the *Shishya* attitude by the development of—
 - (i) respect for the teacher,
 - (ii) a spirit of inquiry,
 - (iii) a spirit of service towards the teacher, the institution, Bharata and Bharatiya Vidya.

8. The ultimate aim of Bharatiya Shiksha is to teach the younger generation to appreciate and live up to the permanent values of Bharatiya Vidya which flowing from the supreme art of creative life-energy as represented by Shri Ramachandra, Shri Krishna, Vyasa, Buddha, and Mahavira have expressed themselves in modern times in the life of Shri Ramakrishna Paramahansa, Swami Dayananda Saraswati, and Swami Vivekananda, Shri Aurobindo and Mahatma Gandhi.

9. Bharatiya Shiksha while equipping the student with every kind of scientific and technical training must teach the student, not to sacrifice an ancient form or attitude to an unreasoning passion for change; not to retain a form or attitude which in the light of modern times can be replaced by another form or attitude which is a truer and more effective expression of the spirit of Bharatiya Vidya; and to capture the spirit afresh for each generation to present it to the world.





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आ नो भद्राः क्रतवो यन्तु विश्वतः।

Let noble thoughts come to us from every side

—Rigveda, I-89-i

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FORBIDDEN FLIGHT

BY

SATYANARAYAN SINHA

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Flight over TERRA INCOGNITA

BHAVAN'S BOOK UNIVERSITY

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FORBIDDEN FLIGHT

BY

SATYANARAYAN SINHA



1955

BHARATIYA VIDYA BHAVAN

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GENERAL EDITOR'S PREFACE

THE Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan—that Institute of Indian Culture in Bombay—needed a Book University, a series of books which, if read, would serve the purpose of providing higher education. Particular emphasis, however, was to be put on such literature as revealed the deeper impulses of India. As a first step, it was decided to bring out in English 100 books, 50 of which were to be taken in hand almost at once. Each book was to contain from 200 to 250 pages and was to be priced at Rs. 1-12-0.

It is our intention to publish the books we select, not only in English, but also in the following Indian languages; Hindi, Bengali, Gujarati, Marathi, Tamil, Telugu, Kannada and Malayalam.

This scheme, involving the publication of 900 volumes, requires ample funds and an all-India organisation. The Bhavan is exerting its utmost to supply them.

The objectives for which the Bhavan stands are the reintegration of the Indian culture in the light of modern knowledge and to suit our present-day needs and the resuscitation of its fundamental values in their pristine vigour.

Let me make our goal more explicit:

We seek the dignity of man, which necessarily implies the creation of social conditions which would allow him freedom to evolve along the lines of his own temperament and capacities; we seek the harmony of individual efforts and social relations, not in any makeshift way, but within the frame-work of the Moral Order; we seek the creative art of life, by the alchemy of which human limitations are progressively transmuted, so that man may become the instrument of God, and is able to see Him in all and all in Him.

The world, we feel, is too much with us. Nothing would uplift or inspire us so much as the beauty and aspiration which such books can teach.

In this series, therefore, the literature of India, ancient and modern, will be published in a form easily accessible to all. Books in other literatures of the world, if they illustrate the principles we stand for, will also be included.

This common pool of literature, it is hoped, will enable the reader, eastern or western, to understand and appreciate currents of world thought, as also the movements of the mind in India, which, though they flow through different linguistic channels, have a common urge and aspiration.

Fittingly, the Book University's first venture is the *Mahabharata*, summarised by one of the greatest living Indians, C. Rajagopalachari; the second work is on a section of it; the *Gita* by H. V. Divatia, an eminent jurist and a student of philosophy. Centuries ago, it was proclaimed of the *Mahabharata*: "What is not in it, is nowhere." After twenty-five centuries, we can use the same words about it. He who knows it not, knows not the heights and depths of the soul; he misses the trials and tragedy and the beauty and grandeur of life.

The *Mahabharata* is not a mere epic; it is a romance, telling the tale of heroic men and women and of some who were divine; it is a whole literature in itself, containing a code of life, a philosophy of social and ethical relations, and speculative thought on human problems that is hard to rival; but, above all, it has for its core the *Gita* which is, as the world is beginning to find out, the noblest of scriptures and the grandest of sagas in which the climax is reached in the wondrous Apocalypse in the Eleventh Canto.

Through such books alone the harmonies underlying true culture, I am convinced, will one day reconcile the disorders of modern life.

I thank all those who have helped to make this new branch of the Bhavan's activity successful.

1, QUEEN VICTORIA ROAD,
NEW DELHI,
3rd October 1951.

K. M. MUNSHI

ABOUT THIS FLIGHT

These are the pictures I gained from Bombay to the Baltic coast.

In the words of Rabindranath: "I know not who paints the pictures on memory's canvas; but whoever he may be,.....he is painting pictures, and not writing history."

Now, I escort these pictures from their sanctuary to new travellers to march over them, and to press onward.

SATYANARAYAN

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PART ONE

THROUGH AFGHANISTAN

Chapter I

DUSTY MONSOON

I

WHEN DELHI GETS HOT I find myself crossing the Himalayas or trying for the Arctic. A change of scenery has often brought me a change of luck, and new life.

This summer I had a plan to cross a few little known passes leading into Tibet. But on the eve of my departure, there was a debate on foreign affairs in our Parliament in the course of which Prime Minister Jawaharlalji said: "India would not have the slightest objection to Dr. Sinha entering Tibet from any pass he liked. But what would happen to Dr. Sinha on reaching Tibet through a closed pass, I could not say."

I imagined meeting a number of Chinese guerrillas on the slope descending into Tibet from a snow-covered pass. They stood before a "Gumpha"—a Tibetan monastery. All around they had hung provisions like frogs and snakes. They themselves and their guests were supposed to live on these "delicacies."

I beat a hasty retreat.

II

The Arctic is not an easy reach from the Himalayas. Not even on a map. And it is a little more difficult

when it comes to an unconventional trip without proper monetary resources.

Depressed by the steaming heat, I walked through the shady corridor along the footpath at Connaught Circus in New Delhi. The glare of the sun closed half of my eyes. It equally affected another person coming out of a tourist agency. I recognised him by his uncombed hair—Yashpal, a pilot who had flown me a number of times on different air lines and who was well-known in aviation circles as Pal.

“Well Captain”, I said, “to what skies are you flying this time?”

“All God-forsaken.”

“What do you mean?”

“Since the nationalisation of the Indian Air Lines I have joined a non-scheduled Company which flies ‘tramp’ planes. There used to be tramp ships, and now we have tramp aeroplanes.”

“How wonderful! Can you take me along on your next flight?”

“It may be to Kabul.”

“I do not mind. That lies on my way to the Arctic.”

“Sure”, he smiled, “just cross the Amu-Darya and the Russians will see to it that you reach the Arctic as their permanent guest.”

“I think, to avoid that easy route will be better.”

“Then, I may drop you somewhere on the Persian Gulf or the Red Sea, and you will find your way further on.”

“Fine!” I jumped cheerfully.

“We will take you as a navigator.”

The trip was arranged, though not strictly according to the prevalent regulations.

III

The waiting was long. Everyday I enquired and was told that the tramp plane was held up in Bombay. And so was the monsoon.

Getting desperate one morning, while some dust-storm raged high, I left for Bombay. The train brought me nearer and nearer to the monsoon until I got drenched at Juhu.

Palm trees enjoyed the full monsoon gust. The sea was muddy, but the high foamy waves looked inviting. A couple of men jumped with the breakers. I too joined them to cool down.

Quite refreshed, I proceeded to Santa Cruz aerodrome to find out my plane. It was parked alongside three constellations and one super-constellation, and in their company it looked battered and unimpressive though declared fit for the unknown skies.

Pal had started the engines. I put my knapsack on board and went to see him. Without diverting his attention from the instruments he said: "Just in time. We leave."

In heavy rains we took off. Visibility was not very bad. After circling the Juhu beach, we were above the dark clouds. The engines vibrated smoothly and temperamentally.

I did not know what course we were going to take.

IV

Automatic pilot was set. Pal asked me to take the co-pilot's seat. I opened the windows. A gush of cold wind rushed through the cabin. We felt fine.

But again we were back to hot and dusty air when we landed at Delhi. Pal felt annoyed with the

atmosphere, and as if threatening it, he said: "We leave at day-break."

Next morning, we turned up early, but the aerodrome formalities detained us till noon. There were clear signs of an approaching heavy dust-storm. But Pal was rather glad—"Any fool can fly in fair weather. It is for us to conquer the outbursts of nature."

Our take-off was without any unusual jerk. In less than a couple of hours we sighted Lahore, where we had to land according to the Pakistan regulations.

The aerodrome authorities looked suspiciously at us and wired Karachi for our clearance. It took a couple of hours. Only in the late afternoon we were able to take off thinking we may reach Kabul before nightfall.

We had to fly through a corridor about twenty miles wide. It went on well till we saw Derah Ismail Khan to our right. Here we crossed the Indus and took a turn towards the Sulaiman Mountains. First the chain of ranges below us looked hazy and then they covered themselves with a thick cover of cloud. Pal looked into the map and shouted: "We are heading straight towards Takht-e-Sulaiman. The holy 'Pir', (priest) there, does not like to see a plane equal to his throne. We shall fly higher for our safety."

Gradually we climbed higher and higher up, till we reached about 17,000 feet, the limit for our machine to climb. Here we ran into a hail-storm. There was no sense in annoying the Pir at Takht-e-Sulaiman at the moment.

We returned to Lahore.

V

The emigration authorities kept our passports and

allowed us to spend the night in the city. Lahore had changed a lot since I saw it last before the partition of India. The shops at the "Mall" looked empty and deserted. The thin crowds seemed oppressed.

I stopped at the Anarkali corner for a sherbet (soft drink), and enquired why the place had so few passersby.

"Old Anarkali is gone since it was looted and burnt", I was told.

"What about the well-known establishments of the city?"

"You will see lots of Americans there."

"Americans?"

"Nothing surprising," the shopkeeper said, "they are here for technical and military aid."

I wanted to pay him for the drink, but felt awkward when I realised that I had no Pakistani money. The shop-keeper smiled: "You are a guest. Do not bother."

We spent the night in a hotel, crowded by Americans. They gulped whisky straight and looked "riotous". Subsequently I came to know they were celebrating a gala party. We had no sleep.

Next morning the weather looked favourable. When we took off we felt like coming out of a prison.

We headed towards the free skies.

Chapter II

TERRA INCOGNITA

I

OUR AERONAUTICAL CHART had a number of areas shown as "Prohibited." Before we took off, the man on duty at the Lahore tower warned us: "Treat those areas as you would a lady in veils. Do not try to flirt with them, the consequences would be very serious."

The landscape below us was flat and uninteresting until we crossed the Indus. Then the slate-coloured Sulaiman ranges began to unfold gradually. First they were tiny hillocks and their summits actually looked like the veils used by Pathan ladies in towns of this part of the country. They seemed to stand still and stare.

At a point where no sign of human habitation was visible, according to our maps, we crossed the Pakistan border. The summits of the hills seemed to raise their heads higher. However, the highest they reached was 10,000 feet, and they did not look like blocking our way.

After crossing them we descended to a lower level above a semi-desert. Here was the salt-lake Ab-e-Istadah, from where we had to turn right. We took the course of a dry channel which ended in this lake. Spotting the channel in the map we found it was the river Ghazni.

Ghazni naturally took us about a thousand years back in memory, and reminded us of Sultan

Mahmud Ghaznavi, one of the most famous figures in mediaeval history, who through his seventeen invasions of India succeeded in changing the course of history of the entire Orient. It seemed amazing how a man hailing from this primitive-looking rugged terrain could muster so much strength and courage to conquer the most developed and cultured part of the world of that period.

Soon we were flying over the ancient city of Ghazni. The city occupies a commanding position on the Tochi-Gomal Pass and looks quite impressive. Part of the ancient city-wall is still preserved.

"Bala-Hesar," said the pilot, pointing downwards, "it is one of the most typical mediaeval castles of the country."

"So, the first and the most crucial invasion of India must have been planned here?"

"Yes, this castle has been the scene of great historical events."

Not very far from the castle we could see a minar, a tower which the pilot said was erected in 1020 A.D. by Sultan Mahmud Ghaznavi to commemorate his conquest of India. We wondered what route Mahmud would have taken to invade India.

The hills before our eyes began to rise higher and higher. It was the end of June, but still the tops of the few ranges were covered with snow. First we flew by their side but soon had to go above them. The pattern below was picturesque. Along the zigzag narrow Shiniz river was a road which traversed a number of green valleys. The contrast of the white snow skyline with green carpet-like meadows below could not have been painted in more matching colours.

"We are ten minutes from Kabul", the pilot told us. "It was a record flight—we have reached Kabul from Lahore within three hours."

"How long did Mahmud Ghaznavi take to cover the same distance?"

"At least three months."

II

We were flying over from one snowy range to another and trying to locate Kabul. But below there was a confluence of a number of valleys leading in different directions. It was hard to decide which channel to take.

"That must be Paghman mountain range which dominates over Kabul", the co-pilot suggested, pointing towards a mountain in front of us.

"No, it cannot be", said the pilot, "Paghman is the only unveiled beauty spot in Afghanistan. Look, that rugged range looks like a turbaned Pakhtoon. That cannot be Paghman. It must look like an unveiled lady's face."

"You have original ways of spotting flying pin-points, Captain", I said. "Your method must be more exact than that usually followed."

"It is, in fact," said the pilot. "But what has happened to Kabul? We should have sighted it by now. It seems, we are proceeding further north in a wrong direction. I will take a turn towards the west."

Again it was a narrow stream we followed. It was hard to locate it in our map. But the pilot said, "I am sure, it is the Panjshir river which meets the Kabul at Sarobi."

The plane drifted further west but the confluence

of the two rivers was not to be seen. Suddenly we saw a town of considerable size below us.

"Kabul cannot have shifted here," the co-pilot murmured. "The houses look grey. There is a big park down below. It must be Jalalabad, the second largest city of Afghanistan."

"I'm blowed if I know where I am!", the pilot replied.

"Now we are flying above the free tribal territories", said the co-pilot, "I know definitely flying is strictly prohibited in this region."

All around were rugged hills. A few spots which looked strategic had scattered houses, all of them with towers. Some smoke was also visible occasionally.

"The Pakhtoon must be roasting a whole 'Dumba' lamb", said the pilot, looking through the window. "That tastes fine. I am really feeling hungry. We are already overdue at Kabul by ten minutes."

"It seems we are heading towards the Khyber Pass and Peshawar", the radio officer intervened. "This is Pakistan's most strictly prohibited area. If they got us here, they would roast us alive."

"And devour us without salt," the pilot added. "No, it needed people like Mahmud Ghaznavi to conquer this route. We must take a turn."

The plane headed towards some ranges which were shown in our map as 14,950 feet and 15,600 feet high. In order to avoid them, we flew further east and crossed into the Parachinar region under Pakistan control.

"This area is also a strictly prohibited zone", the co-pilot said.

"I know", said the pilot, "but what can we do now? To our right are ranges 15,600 feet high. In order to

clear them safely we must fly quite high which will be a great risk to take with this machine”.

We drifted a good deal southwards. According to our map, we were now flying over Tochi valley. We located also the three-mile long Tughrai-Tangi Pass which was the route of Mahmud Ghaznavi for several of his invasions of India.

III

In the meantime our radio operator had contacted Lahore.

“On what areas are you flying over?” asked Lahore.

“Wait, let me see,” replied our operator.

“Don’t you know you are over the prohibited area?”

“Let me find out.”

“What are your intentions?”

“To reach Kabul.”

“But you are exactly 150 minutes overdue. Are you in distress?”

“Don’t know. Shall find out. Will be contacting you.”

With this message, our contact with the world below was broken. Our plane now flew over uncharted areas. All around were rugged, naked mountains looking hungry to swallow us alive. The wings of the plane fluttered to escape their high stretched mouths. No green strip of land was visible in any direction.

“Definitely lost my way”, admitted the pilot. “It is a shame, but I must spot Kabul.”

We had drifted far away from Kabul. After a good deal of difficulty we turned north again and spotted the Kurram river and followed the course towards its source. But this track too disappeared

somewhere above 12,600 feet mountains. Again there were hungry ranges all around. In the falling sunset their parched tongues looked pink with impatience.

"You won't get us," murmured the pilot, putting his hand on the climbing instruments.

"Contacted Delhi," reported the radio operator. "According to them, we are somewhere near Gardez."

"Aha", said the pilot. "Now it is easy to reach Kabul. We will follow the course of this Logar-Rud river which will lead us straight to Kabul."

Again we reached the same confluence of valleys we had flown over three hours ago, and again we missed Kabul.

"Kabul seems to have disappeared somewhere," the pilot thought aloud. "Anyway, Mahmud Ghaznavi could succeed in his seventeenth attempt, I must conquer Kabul in the third."

Below us was the same river we took to be Panjshir in our map. The same green valleys and barren rocks we passed over. By this time we had got acquainted with them so well that we felt at home with them without knowing where they were located exactly.

"What is the fuel position?" the pilot asked the engineer.

"We can fly safely another hour."

"Suppose we fail to locate Kabul," the pilot thought aloud again. "We go to Peshawar. There they have a beacon and a homer."

"But they will put us in prison there," the co-pilot showed his apprehension. "What about a forced landing?"

"Where?" the pilot looked through the window. "I can't see an inch of even strip anywhere."

"Perhaps at Jalalabad?" the co-pilot suggested.

"And what about the odd cargo we have on board?" the pilot said. "Forced landing is out of the question. I shall make another attempt at Kabul."

Turning west, we followed the upward course of the river we took to be the Kabul. The engineer looked at his watch counting even the seconds.

"If it is really the Kabul river we are following, there is nothing to worry about", the pilot said. Within a few minutes we will be in Kabul. If not. . . . well. . . ."

Our plane flew over snow-stripped ranges which divided the similar-looking valleys. We searched and searched, but Kabul did not come in sight.

"Jesus. . . .", the co-pilot took a long sigh.

"Insha-Allah. . . .", said the radio operator.

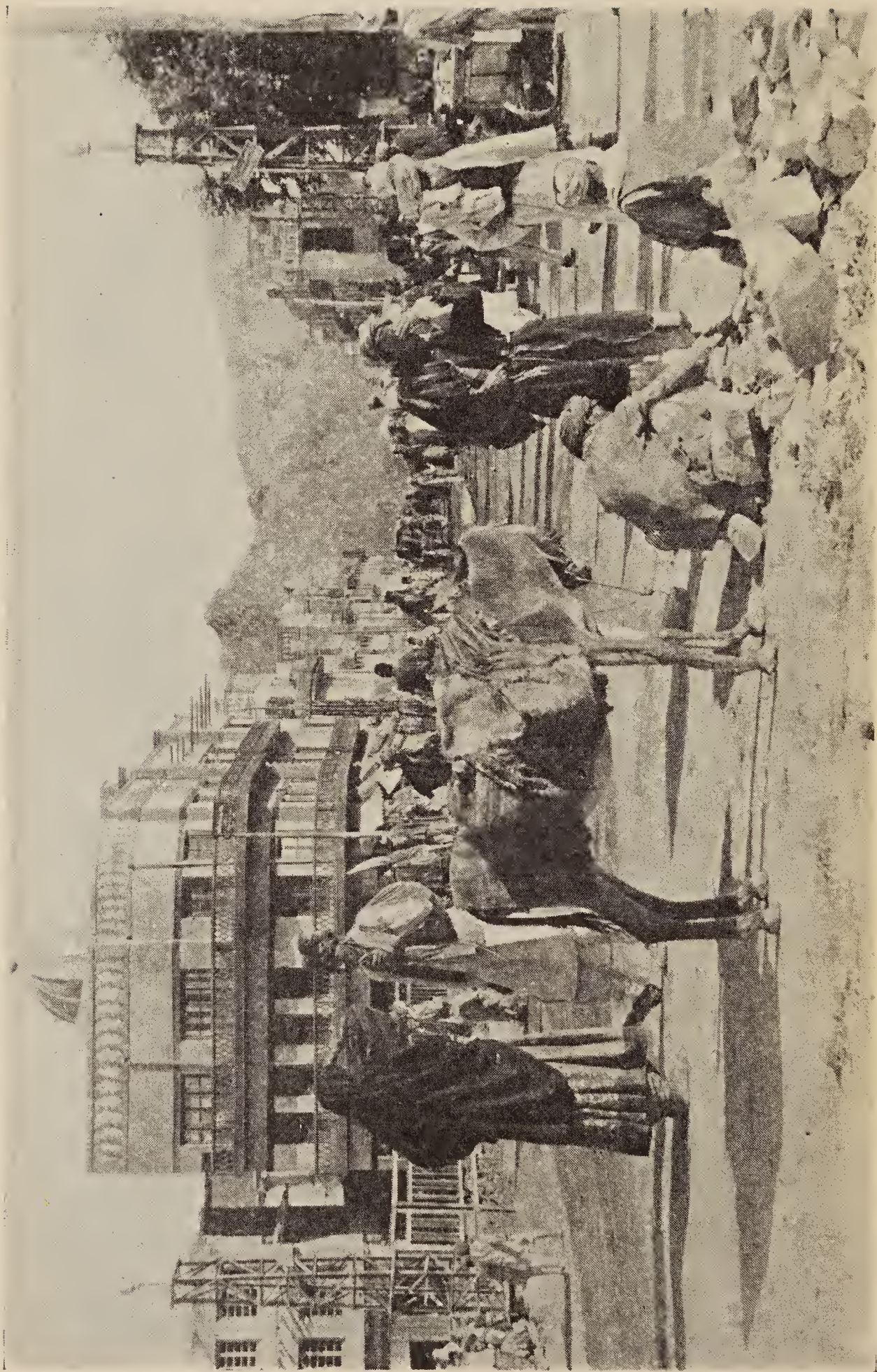
"Namo-Buddhas. . . .", repeated the engineer.

"Let me find out which God is the greatest", said the pilot. "I shall invoke all possible. Ahur-Mazd! Confucius! Shiva! Dalai Lama! Om Mane Padma-ham. . . . There I see Paghman, the only graceful lady range of Afghanistan."

Flying over the Paghman he exclaimed: "And there is Kabul."

We saw Kabul from 14,000 feet high. The mountains around sheltered the city and held it in their laps as their only child. A number of large green patches looked like natural parks carefully carved by nature itself. The trees were all in bloom. The glittering ribbon-like river divided the city into two equal parts.

On one side a grassy patch was supposed to be the



A street scene of Kabul

landing-strip. Our plane went bumping over it for a while. Then it stopped with a jerk. Safely.

Chapter III

THE KABULESE

I

"AEROTRANSPORT" WAS PAINTED in Russian letters on a plane which was parked just off the middle of the airstrip.

"Do the Soviets run an air service to Kabul?" I asked Pal.

He smiled: "Only the Russian and the American Embassies have their own planes here to keep in touch with their respective Governments. Anyhow, I am glad to see that Ivan is still here. I would like to celebrate my landing with vodka. Are you coming along, Dutt?" he asked the co-pilot.

"No, I would go to the Amis, the Yanks, for whisky".

"Do the Ivans and the Amis mix so freely with us here?" I asked.

"We airmen have no politics", said Pal, "anyhow, so far as drinks are concerned, both of them oblige us. Are you coming with any of us?"

"No", I said, "you go to your respective blocs, and send the transport back for me. In the meantime I shall meet some Kabulese."

II

A group of robust and rough sort of men, whom we call Kabulese in our country, were camping just outside the aerodrome by the side of the dusty road. Two of them were skinning a lamb, one was lighting a fire and the elders were sitting on a carpet enjoying the hooka (country smoking pipe).

"Salam-Walekum," greeted the leader of the party who had a red beard and a huge turban on.

"Walekum-Salam", I replied.

"Come on, join us," he said, "I speak your language, because I visit Peshawar often to grab some guns. You must be hungry."

"No, not especially."

"I knew you will refuse my invitation. Indians are funny sort of people. At every step they suffer, because they do not follow the basic laws of life."

"What are they?"

"Everything that you see before your eyes is created by Allah the Great for the pleasure of man. Is it clear to you?"

"Quite."

"Even half of mankind—the fair sex—have been created for the amusement of man. Is it correct?"

"Perfectly."

"Then, if a lamb or chicken comes before you when you are hungry and you refuse it, do you not violate the laws of Allah?"

"Certainly, I do."

"And this is exactly the reason, the Indians are the most unhappy creatures on the face of this earth."

"True enough."

"I know history and can teach you some. You Indians always discard and discourage the best

pleasures of life. Allah could not tolerate this impertinence and he sent us Afghans to rule over you for hundreds of years."

"Now I understand."

"But your people have not learnt anything in life yet. Why do you run away from the enjoyments?"

"Foolishness."

"You are a good man," he said, combing his big beard with his fingers, "you agree with all that I know is pure truth. In case you would not have agreed, I could have knocked down some of your front teeth just in a friendly fight. I cannot tolerate anybody who disagrees with heavenly laws. I administer the same penalties on lambs, mules, women and my opponents. Now you are looking for your jeep which is coming to take you. But before you leave, I shall give you some good advice which will keep you happy in my country."

"What is it?"

"Never be in haste. Take life as it comes to you with all its richness. And when on occasions some disappointment comes, everything will be all right if you just say 'Insha-Allah'. So if they give you bad food in the city, come back to my place, and you can have varieties of Kabuli *kababs*. They will be ready by that time."

I had taken my seat in the jeep. While it began to move, I turned towards the Khan, thanked him for all his good advice, and in reply to his invitation for food repeated, "Insha-Allah."

He was pleased that I had picked up his lesson so quickly. Taking all the trouble to get up, he came to me, shook my hands and said, "Remember this

Khan from Tirah. We shall be meeting again. Insha-Allah. Kuda Hafez.....”

III

Hotel de Kabul is the only modern place for outsiders of which the capital of Afghanistan can boast. An Afghan diplomat whom I had met in India in connection with my visa had told me about this State establishment. According to him, this place was in no way inferior to the Ritz in Paris or the Dorchester in London of which he had heard from other foreigners calling for their visas.

I was a little disappointed when I saw the board of the hotel on a small door looking like an entrance to a serai—caravan stop. It looked dark and dull. I was rather pleased when the manager told me that his hotel was full.

“Can you suggest any other place?” I asked him.

“There is none other in Kabul.”

“Where should I go then?”

“Nowhere”, he smiled. “I will keep your luggage in my room, and you may sleep by joining the dining hall tables when the guests have vacated it.”

It was too much of a worry even to think of that arrangement which seemed to work. Feeling a bit suffocated, I came out into the modern avenue which had a board at the corner, “Shahi Bazar.”

The avenue led towards a bridge on the Kabul river. Standing on the bridge I had a view of a large part of the city widely spread on both sides. The river bed was mostly dry and sandy.

The embankment was made of a small thick wall on which coarse carpets were displayed for sale. A large number of men occupied seats on the carpets

and converted it into a long lined "Majlis." Ladies walked on the roadsides, but they were all in veils without exception. Nobody cared to throw even a glance at them.

The evening was beautiful, cool and refreshing with glittering stars. The old fortress walls along the two hills flanking the city were illuminated with electric light. A bit further away, above the snowy ranges of Paghman, the new moon had come out.

At a mosque built in a modern style I stopped. On the riverside railing-like wall sat a man with an unusually long beard and thick, loose overcoat. From his face I could judge he could understand our language. Approaching him nearer I said, "Salam-Walekum, Mulla Saheb."

"Walekum-Salam."

"You make the social laws here?"

"Yes, I am one of them with good influence."

"Please tell me why you are so cruel towards the ladies."

"Cruel?" He looked surprised.

"Well, they can't even enjoy the fresh air. It must be suffocating inside their *burkhas*, veils."

"They are bad temptations to men", he said, stroking his beard. "If they had no veils, they will make our menfolk fight. Heavy bloodshed will take place for the possession of women. I am afraid, the Kabul river will turn red with blood."

"But I don't think so much bloodshed takes place in the countries where the ladies have full freedom."

"Our case is different", he said with a broad smile. "The men of our country have most violent temperaments. Under the slightest emotional provocation they rather enjoy killing or getting killed. We cannot

relax our rules in this respect. Amanullah tried a bit and soon had to abdicate and flee the country. Nobody in our country now dares raise the question of the removal of veils."

The new moon had disappeared beyond Paghman. A thick veil of darkness had begun to fall over Kabul. Hastily taking leave of the Mullah, I returned to the hotel.

IV

An agreeable surprise awaited me. The manager informed me that he had secured the consent of one of my countrymen to share with him the best room available in the hotel. Showing my gratitude, I said, "Very kind of you, indeed."

"Nothing to thank." He led the way. "We Afghans are coarse and rough, I admit, but you will find them hospitable to their guests. You are a friend of the Khan of Tirah, and I am duty-bound to make you comfortable."

"How did you know that I was a friend of the khan?"

"Why, he has sent your dinner and some fruits which I have placed in your room."

I would not have believed that a casual meeting could have effected the manifestation of such close, friendly considerations.

The manager opened the windows towards the avenue. From all three sides we heard a jumble of music—someone singing at the pitch of his voice in our language. I enquired, "How is that?"

"You will be glad to hear Indian music for twenty hours at a stretch everyday from your room", the manager said. "Just opposite, you have two tea

stalls which have procured a few gramophone records from India. They play them from five in the morning till one at night. On both sides of you, you have two cinemas—the Pamir Palace and the Cinema de Kabul. They also play only Indian music from early afternoon till late at night.”

“I would never have imagined that the Kabulese are so fond of music.”

“We don’t understand the words but like the tunes so much that throughout the year we play the same couple of records for twenty hours a day.”

“Wonderful admiration”, I said, and settled down in the room.

Constantly people gathered and stood before the tea stalls to hear the music they appreciated. Sometimes a number of ladies also in their *burkhas* stood before the stalls. But most of the time there were simple people in *shalwar* with long costumes and tight jackets and huge turbans on, apparently coming from the interior to marvel at the modern entertainments. They were quite different from any other folk I had seen before, including the so-called “Kabuli-walas” of my childhood.

In spite of the pitched music which disturbed my sleep, I repeated, “Good people.”

Chapter IV

THE PAKHTOON KHANS

I

WHEN I OPENED MY EYES and looked through the windows, the first rays of the sun had begun to fall on the snowlines of the Paghman mountains. A thin veil of morning clouds floated leisurely over them. They looked like a Pakhtoon turban on the head of the mountain.

Somebody knocked at the door and without waiting for my reply entered the room. He was a tall, black-bearded Pathan, wearing a typical Peshawari turban.

"I am the driver of a Khan from the south of Waziristan", he reported. "My master has sent his jeep to take you to Paghman."

"But I have not met your Khan yet."

"That does not matter. Both the Khans of Tirah and Waziristan are great friends."

"I have met the Khan of Tirah only once."

"He knows you well by now."

"How does he?"

"The aerodrome police chief is his relative, and he has told all about you to the Khan. Besides, all of us heard on the Kabul Radio last night at the market square that you hold friendly views regarding our Pakhtoon movement. Once you are our friend and guest, everything at our disposal belongs to you."

"That is very kind of you. But what are you taking me to Paghman for?"

"The King has invited the free tribal Khans at his

Paghman palace for lunch. After that they will meet at the lakeside pavilion in the garden. You will meet all the Khans there at tea."

"That will be a great honour for me."

"You will like the place too. One of the loveliest spots it is in the whole of Central Asia."

II

The Pakhtoon driver was not exaggerating. He took me to a restaurant for breakfast, near the top of the Babur Gardens. From here we could get some idea of the typical scenery of the Kabul valley and understand why the Moghul Emperor Babur liked Kabul most of all the places he had seen and conquered, and expressed his wish to be buried here. His mausoleum is a simple one, just a shade to cover his grave and the inscriptions. But looking around the country-side from this dominating top, one was reminded of the poems of another Afghan King, Ahmad Shah Durrani, which he had written after the conquest of Delhi:

The throne of Delhi,
High enough it might look,
I forget,
When I remember,
The beautiful high peaks
of Pakhtun-Khua.

At that time, of course, Pakhtun-Khua was the name of the whole of Afghanistan. This name included all the territory lying between the rivers, Amu Darya—the Oxus, and the Sindhu—Indus.

Since we had ample time, I asked the driver to take me around the outskirts of Kabul. It was a nice drive. We stopped at a number of lovely gardens.

During this time of the year they were in full bloom. On our way we saw also Darul Aman, the new modern Kabul which King Amanullah had begun to build but which has been left unfinished since his banishment. His palace and the secretariat buildings were impressive, surrounded by large green gardens. But the most marvellous impressions we got were in the Kabul Museum.

The Central Asian historical and archaeological collections of this Museum are perhaps the richest. They throw much light on the cultural and artistic developments in this part of the world of a period which is generally dwarfed or brushed aside by giving it the name "dark ages." The Greco-Buddhist sculptures which are some of the brightest specimens of artistic creation are certainly the achievements of a very highly cultural life of the country.

Anyway, the archaeological remnants and the gardens around Kabul created a favourable background in my mind for a far better understanding of my Afghan and Pakhtoon friends.

III

The King's garden at Paghman which is locally known as "Thapa" has a picturesque natural surrounding. It is watered by a natural system through the melted snow of the Paghman, properly channelled through a system called "Dhara." At the first glance this garden has a similarity to the "Nishat" or "Shalimar" at Srinagar in Kashmir.

The lake at "Thapa" is a small one, situated in the middle of the garden. In the hours of long shadows it looks like a glass, reflecting the majestic face of Paghman. A grassy patch on one side, which looked

like a natural carpet, was turned into a "zirga", meeting-place, of the Pakhtoon leaders.

The Khan of Tirah introduced me to all the other Khans. They were Pakhtoon representatives from Chitral in the north to Baluchistan in the south. Those coming from the free tribal areas looked prominent due to their grand physique and hardened faces. The Khan of Southern Waziristan was comparatively young and had a particularly handsome personality. It was he who began the talk.

"People outside have the impression that we Pakhtoos are wild people—savages. This propaganda was started by the British, because we constantly fought their superior forces and armament and succeeded in retaining our freedom—a rare phenomenon in the whole of Asia and Africa at that time. Now Pakistan has taken over this propaganda and intends to dominate over us. I may put it in the words of our old Pakhto poet, Hamid Baba:

"Now, when the whole world
lies in perfect peace,
Alas! a Pakhtoonistan trampled,
tears my heart!"

"We are getting desperate", a Momand Khan intervened. "I would say what once our great Pakhto poet and fighter for freedom, Khushhal, said:

"I scorn the man who without
honour lives,
The very sound of 'Honour'
makes me mad-
What madman heeds a fortune
gained or lost."

For the first time I came to know that there had

been a good number of poets of outstanding merit and fighters for freedom among the Pakhtoons.

"We were cheated when we helped wicked elements in their doomed, cowardly attack on Kashmir", a Khan from Dir said. "Your countrymen have reasons to feel hurt about it, but let us forget and forgive. I can assure you we regret that action very much. Now it is impossible for Pakistan to dupe us a second time."

"Why not put it this way?" a Shorani Khan emphasised. "The history of political developments in India reveals that the Pakhtoons have always been on the side of those fighting for independence, and have without exception opposed those who would help the foreign rulers to remain. This explains why most of the leaders of Pakhtoonistan joined the Indian National Congress. When that party is today the ruling party in India, they should now see to it that our Pakhtoonistan Government is recognised."

"But is your independent Government functioning?" I interrupted him.

"Of course it is", the young Khan from Southern Waziristan said. "This Government was established in 1949 with Gurwaik as its centre. It has its own army, which has in recent years been fighting Pakistan aggression, dealing many crushing blows upon them."

"I would go to the extent of saying", a Yusufzai Khan, who had attended the All-India Pakhtoon Conference, held in Delhi a few years ago, grabbed the chance to speak, "the aggressive action of Pakistan in attacking the Pakhtoon territories is endangering not only the Asiatic but the world peace. We have little contact with the outside world. We will be grateful to you, if you would convey our feelings and

aspirations to other countries, particularly your own."

It was tea time. Plenty of food was brought. They spread "nan", their loaves of bread like banana leaves, and put varieties of meat upon them. We were given another piece of "nan" in our hand. Everybody helped himself from the common stock in the centre. Our drivers and servants also joined us. I liked this brotherhood of the table.

We stopped politics and talked about other matters. They had come to Kabul only for a couple of days to consult the King about some recent developments concerning Pakhtoonistan, and were returning to their respective places next morning. My arrival had just coincided. When they came to know that I was a Member of Parliament, they had decided to invite me to talk through me to our country to which all communications for them were cut off by heavily-armed Pakistani forces. I thanked them for their invitation and promised to fulfil their assignment to the best of my ability.

While parting, I looked into their eyes and shook hands one by one with them all. These were the people who inhabit the historical entrance to the plains of our country, and whom I had considered to be most fanatical, savage and ferocious. Once their mistrust was overcome, they had become quite different to me.

The natural conclusion reached was, "We can be good friends."

Chapter V

FIGHTERS AGAINST FATE

I

“My fetters do not shame me—
Proud beasts are bound in chains!
Whate’er befall, one freedom
—To fight my fate—remains!”

KHUSHHAL, THE GREAT PAKHTO POET, sang while suffering in a Moghul prison for the cause of Pakhtoon independence. This spirit to fight even against fate expresses the real secret of the tremendous strength of the brave Afghan character.

After reaching Kabul, purposely I let myself drift in all possible circles to experience life peculiar to this country. This process brought me in closer touch with the various strata of people, from the roaming nomads to the ruling noblemen. To my great surprise, I found that if one made a polite approach to them, they repaid it by greater friendship and hospitality. The more harsh and rough they outwardly looked, the softer they became, once a genuinely frank contact was established with them. By nature they revolt against the various civilised methods of deceit.

II

One evening while returning from the Paghman side, at a stream in the outskirts of Kabul, we saw a nomad caravan arrive and pitch their tents for the night. My driver pulled up the car saying, “Here

are some Pakhtoon nomads, who think themselves to be the happiest lot in the country. I will take you to their chief Adil, who is considered to be the wisest. He can tell you snake stories which never end."

Old Adil had taken out his hooka and was relaxing in front of his tattered tent. In the evening light his beard looked pink like a carrot.

"Baba" (Grandpa), the driver greeted him, "you have a special style of telling stories. Won't you tell us something today?"

"Yes, sit down", said Adil and called his daughter. "Bibo! Spread a sheep-skin for the guests."

Getting convinced that we were comfortably seated, he began, "Kabul reminds me of the first dreams of my youth. I wanted to be the legendary hero who, although poor, had conquered the heart of the daughter of the richest tribal chief by his might and ability. But Devils only teach love. You know, the daughters of the wealthy look attractive, even though they are without love or wisdom. Once I asked her, 'Let me kiss your hand'. She murmured, 'Devil take you, you son of a nomad! What Devil whispered in your ears to talk to me like this?' And she walked quickly away. After a couple of weeks she married her cousin. Jealousy is a burning fire. I was like a mighty poplar, huge and strong, and that is why I burnt quickly. Women are like green grass—they never turn to ashes. However, my heart and soul forced me to run away from Kabul and seek refuge in misery."

A tear-drop rolled down Adil's cheek, but instead of falling, it vanished into his thick beard. He rose trembling with fear to take another look at the path

leading to Kabul, but turned back. "I never want to have a look at this city....."

"What a hard fate!" A couple of us sympathised simultaneously.

"Wait, you young fools!" Adil commanded us. "Don't curse fate. Fate has been very kind to me. Do you know what happened to the richest tribal chief's daughter? As she could not present any children to her husband, everyone cursed her. Hardest was the behaviour of her mother-in-law. Not able to bear her humiliations she jumped into the Kabul river when it was in spate. They fished her out at the Shahi bridge, dead. She is buried in a grave there that bears her name. That is what happens in rich society.

"I joined my nomadic clan and wandered from one mountain to another until we crossed the Hindu-Kush and reached Mazar-e-sharif. There, while we were camping on the banks of the Amu Darya, I met Khalida, whom everyone affectionately called Lida. A real Kazakh nomad girl. She walked towards me as if she had crossed the broad river just to meet me and become my wife. We sat down in silence. I really felt myself more victorious than the legendary hero. Next year she presented me with our beautiful Bibo. Since then I am so happy that I do not want to change my lot with anybody, not even with the legendary hero. Life is full of strange tales. You have to live it, to understand the happiness of a man who fights his fate and in the end conquers it."

The old man became silent, filled with inner rapture. His story was a simple one but quite a representative example of the fine combination of Afghan folklore and the realities of life.

It had become quite dark. Adil commanded his daughter to take the kerosene lamp and to show us the path to our car. When she lifted the lamp to help us enter the car, I saw her face.

"Is she a typical Afghanese?" I wondered. But I had no way of checking it. That was the only face of a young girl I saw without a veil during all my stay at Kabul. In case it was a typical one, it was worthwhile even for the frustrated great lovers of Paris to come to this country and join the life of the nomads.

III

I had brought some letters of recommendation from Delhi, and through them I was introduced to the circles of high dignitaries and ruling families. They all received me with great courtesy. It was touching to see the real manifestations of their deep friendship and genuine sincerity towards our country. Unconsciously but invariably they put their left hand on their heart in typical Afghan expression of sentiment whenever they mentioned India.

Our talks invariably turned towards the internationally critical geographic and strategic position of Afghanistan. One highly-placed diplomat explained, "Fate has placed our country between the devil and the deep sea. Our fight to steer the political apparatus clearly is the hardest. But the Afghans have always to snatch their fortune from lightning. Win we must, and we will."

"What do you consider is the hardest problem before your country today to solve?"

"Frankly speaking, it is the Soviet propaganda on our northern borders. The Soviets try to impress upon the people of our northern regions the material

progress being made in the Soviet regions north of the Amu Darya. They say the only way for the Afghans to finish with poverty is to destroy the present regime and to form a new Government which will join the Soviet orbit."

"How do you counteract it?"

"As matters stand today, our people are not quite convinced of the Soviet reasoning. They weigh the high cost of the Soviet type of material progress. Amongst all the people on the earth, we Afghans consider ourselves to be most proud of our freedom. There is no individual or religious freedom under the Soviet system, that is why it is unable to make any headway in our soil. But we must work hard to improve the material condition of our people, because on that improvement alone depends a lot of our future destiny."

"We are told the U.N.O. technical assistance and the U.S.A. technical aid is proving helpful to you in this respect."

"You think so?" the diplomat laughed. "Due to our hard-pressed circumstances we have to suffer such aid and assistance. The U.N.O., the U.S.A. and Great Britain will oblige us most, if they did not help Pakistan by supplying them armaments to kill and oppress our Pakhtoon brothers. The British have done a great wrong to our country by cutting off one-third of our country which is known as the Durand Line, and aiding Pakistan to continue occupation of those territories. There can be no genuine friendship between our country and the Western bloc so long as an independent state of Pakhtoonistan is not recognised."

"Now, I see your difficulties clearly."

“The only way out of these difficulties depends upon our own strength and endeavours. This is the general line on which we try to educate our people at large.”

IV

A few days later, I celebrated with the people of Kabul their festival—the children’s day. Most of the shops on the Shahi Avenue were decorated with great labour and love. Huge portraits of the King were displayed amongst a dozen of the oriental “pin-up girls”. People who never have an opportunity to see girls’ faces without veils, enjoyed the display most.

The serious, harsh and rough-looking faces had overnight turned “childish”. In a way, for the while, the Afghans had come to their real elements.

In the afternoon all the male population of the city and the suburbs turned into the Stadium to see some performances by the children. Afghan children look exquisitely beautiful in their colourful national costumes of the different parts of the country.

One particular story of a dance-drama impressed me deeply. A poor girl hailing from the Hindu-Kush mountains, lands in a Panjsher village. Her clothes are tattered. The village girls would not give her shelter or food, nor allow her to participate in their plays. The mountain girl returns to the snow ranges, prays to Allah and digs in the snow for food. She finds gold. She takes a good amount of it and goes to the Panjsher village again. This time, the girls welcome her heartily. They give her food, play with her and take her to their houses. Everybody dances happily.

This story may come true in the case of

Afghanistan as well. If they too can unearth gold, they will be taken into the category of the most advanced countries. But they cannot depend upon fate, they will have to dig up gold.

One morning when I opened my window again, I saw the Paghman tops were covered with gold.

I hastened to reach it, before it vanished. I could also make good use of it.

Chapter VI

PILGRIMAGE TO MECCA

I

ALL WAS SET FOR A TRIP to Mazar-i-Sharif which lies in the north of Afghanistan beyond the Hindu-Kush mountains. The Khan of Tirah had packed the plane with provisions and other travel necessities as if it was going to be a journey to the North Pole. But as fate would have it, the trip was changed into a pilgrimage to Mecca.

“Let us see the Khan off at the airport,” the driver proposed. “And from there we can proceed straight towards the north.” I agreed.

When we reached the plane, we found the Khan in a boiling rage. He refused point-blank to comply with any of the regulations provided for a plane journey. He objected to using a seat belt, in fact he refused to occupy a seat at all. Instead, he spread a

carpet in the rear luggage space, and planned to pray all the way in flight.

"I refuse to obey any of your infidel 'Kafir' rules," he protested. "How dare you put a Khan from the free Pakhtoon areas in straps? Thank God that I am on a pilgrimage, and have parted with my gun for the time being. Otherwise, your heads would have rolled right here by this time."

The crew was the same I had flown with to Kabul. Knowing something of the Khan's temperament, I requested them to forget the rules during this special trip. The pilot said, "Do you want us to have our heads chopped off in the main market square of Kabul, if anything happened to the Khan on this plane?"

"Nothing will happen," I pleaded.

"Why don't you hop in," he suggested, "and take the entire responsibility for the Khan."

At once I complied with his wishes.

II

The take-off was smooth. Only during the sharp turn the Khan had a jolt. He opened his eyes and took up a riding position. Satisfied with his clever manoeuvre and the grace of God, he continued his prayers.

The Kabul river looked smilingly at us. Some portion of it glittered in the morning sun. We climbed higher. Soon the course of this river was hidden behind a gorge.

We flew above the ranges with which we had become well acquainted. They tried to lure us in different directions as on a previous occasion, but this time they did not succeed. We had taken a fixed

course towards Ghazni and then further up towards Kandahar. The high ranges were left behind one by one. And so were the green valleys. Brown-looking hills seemed occupied in a constant struggle for supremacy with the rocky fields.

After a couple of hours' flight we saw a city encircled by a fortress-like wall. The centre of the city was dominated by the dome of the mausoleum of Ahmed Shah Abdali who had built this city as his capital and extended his empire up to Delhi in the eighteenth century.

Quite in contrast with Kabul, not even a blade of green grass was visible here from the air. We landed in a bumpy, rocky field—the aerodrome of Kandahar.

III

Compared to the coolness of Kabul the earth at Kandahar looked like a frying pan. But apparently it did not make any difference to the Khan of Tirah. He spread his carpet by the side of the plane in the blazing sun and offered his prayers to Allah for the safe flight.

Our plane was scheduled to pick up another batch of pilgrims from this place next morning, so we had to spend the night at this place.

The Khan himself went to stay with the Imam of a mosque and we went to the Hotel de Kandahar, a new, modern hotel outside the city walls, built in the new part of the city.

In the evening, when the sun had stopped scorching the earth, a transport with a guide was arranged by the Khan and took us for sight-seeing. We drove

towards the Arghandab river which gives life to the whole area of Kandahar.

IV

The place where we stopped to see the sunset beyond mountain ranges was called Baba Wali. Showing us a cave, the guide said, "It is here that the founder of the Sikh religion Guru Nanak and the great Afghan Pir Hasan Abdal had a conference during Guruji's tour of this country."

We had heard about many miracles and counter-miracles performed by those two saints of the middle ages. Those stories associated with their names had made a number of spots sacred for various religions—Sikhs, Mohamedans and the Hindus.

To us the spot we were visiting seemed a real miracle of nature. Here were a number of canals flowing in various levels above the actual river bed. Along the canals were prosperous orchards, full of several varieties of fruits. As far as we could see in all directions of the Arghandab valley, it was fertile, green and a real place of natural beauty. The whole valley was encircled by mountains which now in the evening shade looked quite lively.

Had we not seen the Arghandab, we would have carried away a wrong impression about the Kandahar region. The fruits grown here were more abundant than at Kabul. On our return drive we saw an unending row of mules, all laden with fresh fruits on their way to the border and then further up from Chaman onwards by railway to India.

The evening was cool and fresh. An Afghan family had arranged our dinner, and it was served to us in a very sumptuous style. While taking leave

they told us, "Water makes all the difference. If you have this gift of nature, and if you can utilise it properly, you can be assured of a happy life, free from worries."

Next day at sunrise we continued our flight. The Khan again took his seat on the carpet. But this time he had brought two attendants to hold him tight in case the plane bumped, while he prayed.

Our plane flew over Baba Wali and within a few minutes we reached the confluence of the Arghandab with the Helmand. The landscape too changed completely. Indications were of an approaching desert. They had told us at Kabul how they were going to make this desert fertile through their Helmand project. As far as we could judge from the air, the Helmand venture must be the greatest venture of the Afghans against nature.

V

The landscape was so similar on the Iranian border that we did not mark when exactly we had crossed the Afghan border. For refuelling we landed at Zahedan which was already in Iran.

The Khan had also marked the change in the air, and now wanted to put on his pilgrim clothes. But before performing that change ceremony he needed some water, which was not available. Seeing that he might flare up again in rage, we took off immediately the refuelling was finished.

Our next stoppage was at Bahrein. Here too, no water was available for the Khan. But he had seen the sea, and rushed towards it for his clothes-changing ceremony. On return he asked for some water to

drink, but we had none. Not to allow him to make a scene, we took off on our last hop to Jeddah.

VI

Down below, all around, was the vast Arabian desert. Not a sign of habitation was visible anywhere. The colour of the earth was a peculiar one—a mixture of pink and grey. The only thing, full of life, was the hurricane which very often obscured our vision. Anyway since we had no pin-points on earth to check our map, it made no difference so far as our flying was concerned.

Hour after hour passed, but the scene remained the same. When the fifth hour began, the pilot got worried about his track and the Khan was impatient for water. But the pilot insisted on getting ahead whereas the Khan commanded that the plane land then and there. As minutes passed, both became irreconcilable to each other.

Adopting an aggressive attitude, the Khan asked his aids to open the door of the plane. They turned the handle and made some opening through which a desert blizzard seemed to come in. Next second what we expected was a blast which could have swept away a few of us with it. For the first time I had a glimpse of the earth through the open door of a plane flying at 12,000 feet with an airspeed of 150 miles per hour. No doubt that was the face of sure death.

Our flight mechanist had seen meanwhile what was going to happen now. In one jump he slammed the door again and tied it down with a rope. The Khan smiled mischievously.

The pilot had seen some white houses, and we all

had reasons to be jubilant. But there was no sea nearby, therefore that spot could not have been Jeddah. Some calculations and close observations left no doubt that the spot could be none other than Mecca Sharif.

As if startled from his sleep, the pilot jumped up from his seat saying, "If they found out, surely they would put us all to death. We are flying in the most strictly forbidden area." Looking at his co-pilot he said, "Only the devil could have directed us this way."

Quickly he took a sharp turn. Ahead we saw a good road showing us the way. We followed it.

The fierce glare subsided into the indigo blue of the sea. In the long evening shadow, bowing down towards Mecca, was the prostrated Jeddah.

VII

Once standing on the solid sacred soil, the Khan began to behave in an extremely polite way. In soft tones more due to deep feeling than thirst, he said, "I am sorry for my anger. Our religion forbids us to get angry after we have changed into pilgrim's clothes. Now in order to get rid of the sin I have committed, I must sacrifice a couple of good pet lambs. It is better I get them from my own country with your next flight. Anyway, let us forget now all about anger."

On the road across the air-terminal we saw the green minaret of a little mosque. A Muezzin moved round to call for the "Azzan"—the evening prayers. The airport personnel were hastening to the mosque. The customs officers left their counter and so did the gate-keepers. The money-changers too, who had their neat piles of coins heaped in small pyramids on

flat trays, left their money, quite confident that none dare touch it in their absence.

The religious-minded Khan could not listen to the call for prayers, unmoved. He crossed all barriers which had now become empty. I too followed him quite forgetting that we had not yet gone through the passport and customs requirements. After prayers, he became more impatient than before to reach his goal—Mecca Sharif. We immediately hired a taxi, and I accompanied him to the two tall stone pillars marking the entrance to the “Forbidden Territory.” None but the true believer may venture to proceed further.

There he spread his carpet on the roadside to say his last prayer of the day, and also for a grace of God for me. I sat by his side in a kneeling position, silently.

At the last stage of his prayers he murmured in a way that I could follow. “O, gracious, almighty and great God! Fulfil all my wishes. Make that Khan of Kohat who is my enemy, a better man, and Pakhtoonistan a free and brave country. O God, be merciful to my Indian friend. May he get a present of aeroplanes so that he may bring me every year here to offer my prayers....”

He continued to talk to his God about all his problems in his own way. When he had finished, he turned to me and said, “This car will take you back to Jeddah. From here, I shall proceed on foot. My pilgrimage will finish within a month, and then I would like you to fly with me to Pakhtoonistan. Will you wait?”

“I shall visit some Western countries in the meantime.”

“That is a good idea. Go and get some good guns

for us. With those guns and with the grace of God we shall build up a free Pakhtoonistan which will not allow any enemy to attack India. So, Allah is Great. He will fulfil all our wishes. Allah's grace be with you. We shall be meeting soon."

"Insha-Allah", I replied, returning to the car. He walked alone towards Mecca, looking like a saint. I followed his steps until he vanished in the moonlight.

VIII

Looking from a bend, the holy Arabian Coast looked surprisingly soothing in the milky moonlight. Its minarets were hung poised above the seascape where the deep resonant voice of the Muezzin floated across the still air of the night. The low foothills of the Arabian mountains beyond, which lost themselves in the distance, peered timidly like veiled women from their windows.

My mind flew further and further east until it stopped at some Himalayan peak on the Tibetan border. There it was that I had planned to reach.

And where was I?

Drifting in the desert. Further and further west.

PART TWO

ARABIA TO ACROPOLIS

Chapter I

AT JEDDAH

I

A GREAT DISAPPOINTMENT awaited me at the airport.

I was put under arrest by the police officer whom I had approached to get my arrival stamped in the passport. In his guttural Arabic which sounded like pebbles falling out of a smashed pitcher, he went on piling accusations against me. Due to my poor vocabulary in that tongue, I was unable to stop him. My comparative silence made him furious. He was under the impression that the man who crossed his barriers during unguarded prayer interval must be a hardened criminal. Such criminals in turn must possess the mastery of his language to admit the seriousness of the crime they have committed, and to extend their hands willingly to be chopped off.

For a moment he was unable to decide the procedure he was supposed to adopt in my case. Perhaps this was the first case of the kind he had come across. He put my passport away with an authoritative declaration that it was impounded. Then, handing me over to his aids to be taken to the lock-up, he threatened: "Your fate is sealed."

II

An European air-agent turned back as if the words were directed against him. The police officer beckoned and asked him to interpret in French to me.

"His Highness says", the agent began in his whizzing Greek accent, "your plane had no previous clearance to land in Saudi Arabia. Suppose, we grant you, it was an emergency landing on your way to Port Sudan, that would fix up the first difficulty. But you had no business to fly over Mecca. That was a clear violation of our rules....."

"We forgot our way...", I pleaded.

"That is possible on desert flights, His Highness the Police Chief may excuse you for that even. But say, why did you enter Saudi Arabia illegally? You cannot have any excuse for this crime. His Exalted Highness is sure, you must be a smuggler of wine which is strictly prohibited in this country, or a journalist.

Now I realised the actual reason of the Police Chief's outburst. Some years ago, while passing through Dhahran—another airport in Saudi Arabia, I had to face a similar difficulty. At that time, my passport had betrayed me that I had the profession of a journalist. The Police Officer of Dhahran was highly suspicious about it. When I asked the reason, he confided—His Majesty Abdul Aziz Ibn Abdur Rahman al-Faisal, commonly known as King Ibn Saud, had reasons to believe that the journalists slandered him about the number of wives he had. Some of them had put them as only a few dozen when in actual fact he had no fewer than a hundred and fifty wives, by whom he had a large number of acknowledged children. On that occasion a Saudi Arabian diplomat who had perhaps a slightly better impression about me, had come to my rescue. He pleaded to the Police Officer that I belonged to a highly-placed family. To get me considered digni-

fied, he quoted, without consulting me, that I had a harem of no less than a dozen wives. The Police Officer immediately released me, and sent me home at his Government's expense.

Having benefit of this experience about the way the mind of some police officers of Saudi Arabia worked, I emphatically denied being either a smuggler or a journalist, and emphasized that I belonged to a select society.

"You will have to convince our new King His Majesty the Saud Ibn Abdul Aziz, about your bonafides."

"When can I have an audience?"

"Not before a couple of months", the Police Chief conveyed through the agent. "His Majesty cannot be disturbed before the Haj ends. In the meantime you will remain in our custody." He had a mischievous smile when talking about custody and pointing towards the lock-up.

"But I have a diplomatic visa for this country," I asked the agent to translate in commanding Arabic. "You cannot detain me. If I was not a very important person, they would not have given me a diplomatic visa."

"That I must verify." The Police Chief took out my passport from the drawer and tried to scrutinise it. "Here it says, you are a Member of Parliament. What does it mean?"

"A member of the ruling class", the Greek agent explained to him. "As here you have Emirs who rule Saudi Arabia, so those who rule India are called Members of Parliament."

"Now I understand." The Police Chief endorsed the entry, got up and returning my passport with ex-

tremely polite gestures, said, "Excuse me, your Excellency!"

Our plane too was released. It had to return immediately to pick up other batches of pilgrims. I came out of the air-terminal with the Greek agent who had a fine-sounding name—POPOPOLUS.

III

"You are lucky. . . ." There was a note of warning in the Greek's tone. "But I will advise you to leave this country before your luck runs out."

"Why should I be scared? I have no intention to break any laws of this country, of what should I be afraid?"

"Anything may happen under this scorching sun. Very often it dries up all sources of joy and not infrequently does it take away life itself."

"I do not understand you."

"I also did not understand until I came in conflict with some of the funny customs and the strange ways of life here and got terribly involved in them."

"I am a transit passenger, why should I come in conflict with any of the social customs of this country?"

"You are too vague", I said and tried to change the conversation. "Where would you advise me to spend the night?"

"There is no choice for you but to stay in the only hotel which has been built chiefly for the convenience of the Emirs. If you were a pilgrim, the case would have been different, you could stay in the austerity huts and go through the severe ordeals they all gladly go through."

In order to have an idea of the place I preferred to

walk to the hotel and get my suitcase sent later on. Popopolus showed me the way.

IV

It was not quite an easy walk. Hardly had we covered half a mile when I was soaked with perspiration and felt exhausted. Popopolus took me to a side street where stood a luxurious taxi before a dreary, crumbling garage. Through a hole in one of the walls of the garage, we could look into a part of the side room. Hearing some noise outside, two women tried to peer through the opening. We could not see their faces because the light of the hurricane lamp hanging in the garage was very poor. Since some veiled figure moved, we guessed some women must be there. A man sitting on a canister in the centre of the garage was trying to fix up his shoes. Before replying to our queries he got into a terrible fit of rage. Swearing filthily, "curse on you infidel women—sisters of stray camels....", he lunged at the women with the shoe in his hand and hit them in the face. Trying to knock them on the ground he shouted, "Who taught you to stare at strangers? Ye daughters of the stoned devils of Muna". He pointed with his finger to the darkened room and gave a thundering command. The women, with a subdued shriek, brushed their veils and vanished into the darkness.

Having done the duty of a proper husband, the man took the driver's seat and drove us away.

V

"Are the women the driver's slaves?" I asked Popopolus.

"No, his wives", he replied. "Treatment of slaves is worse."

"Can the wives not file complaints?"

"Before whom?" He explained: "In Saudi Arabia a wife is property. She can be used and abused. The society and the law allows husbands to beat their wives. The husbands here can have in practice as many wives as they can afford. I know, there are markets here to procure slaves as well as wives."

"Terrible!"

"Now you can understand my feelings when I have definite information that some of the girls from my country too have become commodities of these cruel markets."

"Why don't you get them out?"

"I am trying, but it is not an easy matter. Perhaps in one case you may be of some help to me. Can I depend upon you?"

"I shall see....."

We had reached the palatial hotel. Seeing some Arabs who could understand us, Popopolus hurriedly changed the subject: "Allah Karim.... God is gracious."

Thinking, he waited for my reply. I too repeated: "Allah Karim....."

Chapter II

ARABIA AT NIGHT

I

A NUMBER OF NECESSITIES that make up the complicated life of civilisation, are unknown to Jeddah. There are no drinking booths, no cinemas, no playing of gramophone records—which are usually the main attractions of an Oriental bazaar. A profound impression is also made by the total absence of women's faces in any part of the city.

All old pattern houses are built after the conception of a fortress or a harem. The word "harem" literally means "forbidden." Perhaps the idea was to forbid even light and air from penetrating the dark houses where the women-folk have to live their whole life. The custom of the country commands that women restrain their eyes and pull down their veils full length, taking care to cover themselves from head to foot. Directions are, not to show their ornaments except to their men-folk or other women. They have to draw their veils tightly over their faces and usually show only one eye.

All this looked unusual and strange.

II

The hotel I entered was air-conditioned. The difference with the outside temperature was tremendous. So was the interior atmosphere. It was all first class European style.

At the counter I enquired about a room. The

receptionist replied in good English that since some of the Emirs were out of station, he could give me a very good room.

"Can I afford it?" I thought.

"It will cost you about fifteen guineas a night."

"That makes more than two hundred rupees. It is exorbitant."

"But you will be staying in an Emir's room, that means a royal chamber."

"Who are these Emirs?"

"Why", the receptionist was surprised at my ignorance—"all sons—who are in considerable number—of the late King Ibn Saud are Emirs. This hotel was originally meant for them. As a courtesy shown to foreign Emirs like the oil concessioners of America, the Nawabs of India or certain rich diplomats, we allow them to stay here. The Police Chief informed us that you will be calling here. He said you are also an Emir...."

I intended to avoid his suspicion: "We will decide about the room later on. First I would like to have dinner."

"You are welcome." Showing me the way to the dining hall the receptionist addressed me: "Your Excellency! This way."

Once one was allowed entrance to the hotel, it seemed, he was automatically considered equal to an Emir. The other guests too showed him the same courtesy. It looked like a formation of rich men's brotherhood.

Leading me to a table where he said was a gathering of most feudal richness, the receptionist introduced me: "His Excellency the Emir from India."

Strangers did not appear to spoil the friendly

atmosphere of the table. I was immediately enrolled as a new member of their brotherhood and allowed to join in their lively discussions.

III

"We are safe", said an American oil Engineer, "only so long as Saudi Arabia does not allow any Russian to set foot on its soil."

"But how can you stop them?", the English representative of the Iraq Oil Company interrupted, "I am told the Soviet Government is sending some of its nationals this year on a pilgrimage to Mecca."

"The Communists are coming for Haj. . . .", a bulky ex-Pasha laughed, "so that their Stalin is not stoned in hell."

"No", the Englishman explained, "there is nothing surprising. There live thirty million Muslims in Russia. Now, when there are relaxations in religious matters, the Soviet Muslims intend to effect a tie with the Brotherhood of Islam in the countries south of their border."

"I am sure", the American protested, "the communists are sending their agents to grab the rich oil fields from us."

"I will not be surprised if they made an attempt in this direction", the Englishman agreed. "After all, Saudi Arabia is the strongest American base in this part of the world. The American planes can fly from these bases and explode the Russian oil fields within two and a quarter hours. They can reach Sverdlovsk in Ural in less than five hours, and within a little over four hours they can bomb Moscow. Nothing surprising, if the Russians try to capture this enemy base through their Haj pilgrims."

"I am not worried about oil", the ex-Pasha intervened. "Will the Russians abolish all the 'harems' in this country? Surely, they will direct their propaganda against the treatment of women in Saudi Arabia. Their underground branch for women will stampede the whole country."

"On this account you need not have any worries", a Persian, boasting of royal ancestorship assured. "The Soviets will endorse the Saudi Arabian code and support the system that holds women in an inferior position. You can comb through all the Russian broadcasts and literature prepared for these areas, you will not find a word that challenges or defies either the Saudi Arabian system of 'harem' or the prevalent Muslim customs. The communists too in this part of the world do not want to clash with the Mullahs. The Russian technique in this respect is subtle and their method of attack is quite different. I am of the opinion that the Russians will make an alliance with the Mullahs to undermine the hold of the Western Powers in the Middle East and leave the women in their harems."

"Your Highnesses! Your Excellencies!", the Arab Manager of the hotel holding a paper in hand announced, "I have received a query—how many rooms in this hotel can be released for the Russian Communist Haj pilgrims?"

"Not a single", several dignitaries of the table shouted simultaneously. "This Holy land should bar communists."

"If they reach Mecca", the American said jumping up from his seat, "they should be stoned like Devils."

The announcement had dispersed the gathering in excitement. I too called for my bill. It was five

guineas. I translated it into rupees and exclaimed: "Seventy-five rupees for a dinner?"

"Your Excellency!" the waiter reminded, bowing low, "the Emirs never question their bills."

The strange party had broken up. I decided to spend the night under a starry sky.

Outside, the moon looked enticing.

IV

At the first corner I came across Popopolus. He was excited: "Russians are coming to Mecca. This is great news. They may be treated as State guests."

"What makes you think the Saudi Government will give them such a friendly reception?"

"In their hearts the Saudi rulers are not satisfied with the Americans. Of course, the Aramco—the Arabian-American Oil Company—pays the Arabian rulers more than two hundred million dollars yearly as royalties. But the Arabs know that even this amount is only a beggarly gift for the exploitation of their exceptionally rich oil resources. They may contact the Russians to get their royalties increased."

"Why not the British?", I asked. "They are the first competitors of the American oil interests in these regions."

"The Arabs do not trust the British due to their dispute with them over the possession of the Buraimi oasis on Saudi Arabia's borders."

We walked briskly. Although it was late at night, we perspired.

"Can I not have a bath somewhere?" I enquired.

"Not with fresh water", Popopolus replied. "There is shortage of water here to the extent that it is sold for a shilling a bucket. And that also is available

only in the morning. But you may have a sea bath."

"I do not mind." I asked him to take me to a suitable beach.

V

Another half-an-hour's walk brought us to a lovely creek. The sea looked silvery in the moonlight. A midnight bath in it seemed most refreshing.

"Don't swim very far", Popopolus warned from the shore. "Occasionally some sharks sneak into these waters."

Not sharks but some seaweed of the lagoon disturbed me. I kept nearer to the coast and floated leisurely. The water was so salty that it seemed difficult to sink. All fatigue and worries were definitely drowned. Flying of time did not matter.

It must have been quite a long waiting for Popopolus. For a while I had seen him collecting shells and corals. Then he too had disappeared.

How far I had floated, I did not know.

VI

"Quick! Quick!", a shrill voice called me from the shore. When I looked back I saw three black figures standing on the silver-radiated sand. First I took them to be Bedouins, ferocious people with scowling faces. At a couple of yards from them, recognition dawned on me—it was Popopolus standing with two women of queenly posture with uncovered faces. They had dropped their veils. They were tall, with fine chiselled features. One was fair and the other dark. They were bare-feet.

"This fair woman is my compatriot Elena", Popopolus introduced in a soft voice. "The other

one is a Sudanese slave girl. They have run away from a harem where they were brought through deceit and force, a few months ago. We must help them in their escape from a tyrant Emir. With your help we must organise a suitable escape route from this hell they have been thrust into."

"But how?"

"I have chalked out a plan", he said pointing towards some distant lights. "There is the harbour. A ship which has today brought pilgrims from Suez is scheduled to leave at dawn on its return voyage. I have spoken to the ship's doctor. He will be helpful to us. But I have ceased to trust any Arab including Egyptians about any matter concerning women. I have doubts that they may resell the women. You are a man to be trusted."

"What do you expect me to do?"

"You should take the same boat."

We looked like conspirators. Before it was time for the Muezzin to call the devout for the dawn prayer, we reached our destination. The night watchman at the ship's gangway maintained his silence when three golden sovereigns were thrust into his hand. He showed the two women a safe place somewhere in the ship's hold. I occupied a berth in the doctor's cabin.

VII

Before the sun had awakened the desert by its blaze, Jeddah had already receded for us into the past. Its last minaret which hung poised above the seascape for a few seconds, also vanished into the shimmering heat.

Further ahead lay a broad expanse of sea embrac-

ing a clear sky, and beyond that—an unknown life throbbing.

Chapter III

AYESHA

I

NEVER HAD WE LONGED more for dark clouds. The green fields, the splash of rain and the sweet smell of the saturated earth had become phenomena of past dreams. Here, there was no escape from the pitiless sun while sailing through the Red Sea.

Our cabins had turned into hot furnaces. The air which crossed from one desert coast to another had no time to cool down. Even at night while lying directly under the stars, we perspired.

The kitchen stewards, with whom we made friends, went about in white or red tarbooshes, long robes and embroidered jackets. The fat Chief Steward, Jamal, who had the general appearance of an eunuch looked like a horrible executioner when he stood at the meat table with a scimitar in his hand. Most of the other crew of the ship were aboriginal Egyptians of all shades from chocolate brown to coal black.

Since the ship's hold where the stowaways from the harem had been thrust into, proved to be suffocating, they were given a cabin above the propellers, originally meant for stores. Elena discarded her veil and changed her Arab costume for a European dress, borrowed from the nurse working under the

ship's doctor. Such behaviour of a one-time harem inmate horrified the Sudanese slave girl—Ayesha.

The two women remained mostly secluded in their cabin. Only at night they emerged occasionally to enjoy the sea breezes. Even then they stood silently at the extreme astern point over the rudders and looked with amazement at the waves the ship had crossed.

II

Late in the evening, Ayesha stood alone at the astern point. Finding that she did not get scared at our footsteps, I approached her along with the ship's doctor. From the moment I had seen her, it seemed, she was the living monument of the cruelties of a desert life the semi-nomad Bedouin shifts from his robust shoulders to the tender body of an unfortunate child turned into a slave. It was interesting to follow her course of life which had sprung on the banks of the upper Nile and had tracked a number of Arabian deserts without vanishing in the blazing sand where no marks remain for long uncovered by the blizzard. Her story unfolded an extraordinary Arabian panorama, quite different from what people of the outer world imagine about these regions.

It was not possible to get the true narrative of the Arab life straight from her. She could express herself only incoherently in her little spoken Sudanese dialect which my Egyptian doctor friend could follow. We had to piece it together and set it in the background of countries and people to whom access is mostly prohibited to the outside world.

III

Faintly she could remember the vast Nile and the small green patch of fertile land where she was born. She talked of high "atols"—pillar-like sand-hillocks which located her somewhere on the Ethiopian borders. The place might have been on the Blue Nile along which passes an important caravan route from the primitive part of Ethiopia to the modern world of Egypt. Besides camels, she recollected having a ride on a donkey cart in her childhood.

Being a girl, she was not much loved by her parents who valued only boys fit for earning wages as a caravan hand. Unwashed and ragged, she had ample time to play with other girls of similar fate in a pool of filthy mud near her house.

A day came when a big caravan stopped for the night on the river bank near her village. It was "Id", festival evening to feast and rejoice. A party of young lads sang and danced beating their drums by the "atols." Ayesha too had her sweets for the first time. The red-bearded caravan leader promised her some more and packed her with some other load on to a camel's back. Soon she learnt that her cries would not reach very far into the desert. By the time she reached the Red Sea coast, she became quite resigned to her fate.

The caravan leader bartered her for some textiles with an Arab country boat crew. She was put in the hold of the dhow with the other cargo of cattle, goats and slaves brought from different parts of East Africa. The overpowering stench made them forget all troubles of sea-sickness.

After a couple of weeks' sailing and dodging coastal patrols, the dhow crossed the Red Sea and

reached Hodeida—a small port of the Arab state of Yemen. This was the territory of Imam Yahya—the most primitive of all Arab lands. It is a hot, sandy country of semi-nomad tribesmen. All powers in the State are vested in the King—Imam—who is the sovereign master of life and death over his subjects. The Imam Yahya, who ruled for forty-four years before he was murdered in 1948 had forty-four children, and the whole national income derived from coffee or slave trade belonged to his personal treasury. A lot of dazzling foreign commodities were brought to his capital at Sana, not to escape the personal attention of the King—Yahya Ibn Mohammed el Mansour Ibn Yahya Hamid al-Din, to give him his full name. Along with the foreign commodities from the dhow, Ayesha too was brought to Sana's slave market.

They had given her some clay to use as soap and water to wash with. After her toilet, when she was exhibited in the market, her face looked bright and shining. Her looks added to her adolescent age of fourteen, attracted a tribal Chief—Sheik Ibn Hussaini—who bought her, as a wife. For a couple of years she remained the favourite wife of the Sheikh until he discarded her in favour of a fairer Italo-Eritrean girl. Once fallen in disgrace, she was continuously subjected to humiliating regulations. The Sheik commanded her in his original style:

“In the name of Allah, the Merciful, the All-Compassionate. This is my command to the infidel Sudanese Ayesha, whom I had taken as my wife: From now on, she must remain submissive, servile and poor, subservient to my other wives, and serve them as their most devoted slave. She may not wear white, red

or green garments as these are the colours worn by my favourite wives. She must look wretched so that she may not arouse the jealousy or envy of my other wives. Her daily work will be to grind millet on handmill, bake bread, gather wood and dung from the fields, carry water from the well and kill lice from the garments and hair of my favourites. This command is in accordance with our ancient religious practices which have been always in use in the times of the pious Sheikhs, but were forgotten under the influence of the Godless Turks, the Jews and the Aden Christians.”

With this edict, the Sheikh made the life of Ayesha unbearable. For the least trespass of his orders, she was tied with ropes and mercilessly beaten. But there was no escape. She was the property of the Sheikh.

Even in a closed country like Yemen where one is obliged to obtain the express permission of the King either to enter or leave the country, some changes took place in 1950, when the new King Ahmad wrote in a corner of a petition of the Jews the Arabic words: “La Mana aleikum.” The words literally mean: “I shall not prevent you.” The ruler of Yemen had thrown open the gates of his country to the Jews to get out. A few oppressed slaves like Ayesha too took advantage of the occasion to escape from the capital. In the company of some Jewish women, she reached the borders near the sea coast. But there they found out that she was not a Jew. She was handed back to a group of Arabs who put her on a dhow again and brought her to a slave market in Saudi Arabia. Here she was purchased by an agent of an Emir, who brought her to his harem to work as a maid-servant.

It was here that she was employed as the personal slave attendant of the Greek favourite Elena. Both had now joined hands and run away not only from the harem but the Arab coast which had become their cruel prison.

But they did not know yet what awaited them ahead.

IV

Next afternoon when Port Sudan was in sight, the purser of the ship told me: "If King Saud came to know about these escapes, he will never allow our boat to touch his coast. We shall have to think of a way out."

"Are there no organisations in the Middle East which could help these unfortunate women?"

"At least I am not aware of any. However, so far as the fair one is concerned, there are Greeks in all the ports who will take care of her. But I am worried about the Sudanese."

"May be, the Sudanese will take care of her."

"Do you think them to be so advanced?"

"Well, they have shaken off the colonial yoke of Britain. To a great extent they have made themselves free from the grip of the Egyptians. They have a Parliament now. How can they tolerate any of their nationals being abducted as slaves?"

"It seems", the purser commented, "you have been in the Middle East only a short time."

The ship berthed at the *Kai*. Outside, the sun scorched everything. It could turn any living object black in a short while. But it was a new country trying to put its step forward towards advanced civilisation.

A young Indian merchant, a resident of the place, who had come to get some goods cleared from the customs, greeted me. "Can I help you?"

He advised, the nearest way to the city was through the crystal lake where one could count the pebbles of the sea-bed through deep water. We hired a boat to cross the lake. A few Sudanese children jumped into the water and asked us to throw in small coins which they could easily fish out before they reached the bottom. It was amazing how skilfully they did it.

"Yes", my countryman said; "they can fish out small things but hundreds of big living things disappear through these waters. Every year hundreds of forcibly abducted slaves are carried through this lake, and nobody stops them."

I told him Ayesha's story. He assured me that any Sudanese political party would be interested and take care of the case.

He took me to the local office of the National Unionist party, which had the majority in the first parliamentary elections. The impressive-looking office bearer promptly agreed to help Ayesha for reasons of humanity. Turning to the Indian merchant he said: "We have not many cases of our forcibly abducted and enslaved nationals returning to free Sudan. We must get them all back, so that we may prove to the world that we Sudanese can do greater service to our nationals if there is no obstruction in our administration from the side of the British or the Egyptians."

He readily accompanied us to the boat, on the way relating the problems his country had to face after gaining its independence. For all the help India had

rendered, he expressed the general appreciation and thankfulness of his country.

At the crystal lake while waiting for the boat, we came across the wicked-looking Jamal, the Chief Steward of our ship. He gave us the news with a mischievous smile on his face: "We have fixed up the girl well. There is no worry now."

"How have you?" the Sudanese young man asked him in Arabic.

Jamal pointed towards a corner of the harbour where a few dhows had anchored.

"Have you sold her again?"

"No", he replied impertinently, "just gave her away for a bottle of wine. You know, we have no intention of becoming a party to violating Saudi Arabian laws."

A dhow was lifting its anchor.

"And you dare to violate Sudanese law..", said the young National Unionist, at the same time striking the steward on the face. "Show me the girl and I will teach you bargaining which you will remember all your life."

He dragged the steward towards the dhows, and signalled us to keep the boat ready.

V

"Will they be able to recover her?", I asked my merchant friend.

"Surely", he replied. "At the most, we shall have to pay some ransom. Many times I have seen such transactions. They are revolting customs according to civilised codes. But you are in the Middle East where you are forced to swallow a number of inhumanities."

A little further away, near a dhow, bargaining went

on intermittently until it was almost sunset. A small crowd which had gathered at the spot, gradually increased. For a moment it looked as if the bargaining would end in a mass fight. But then a way was paved, and we saw the Sudanese young man emerging with Ayesha leaning upon him. When they came nearer it became clear, the Arabs had twisted one of her ankles to make her immobile and gagged her to stop her cries. The Sudanese put her near the water to enable her to wash her face. She did it in between deep sobs.

"Never mind", the young man consoled her, "you are quite safe now. I shall get a car for you."

My ship had begun to whistle. I asked the boatman to reach me to the ship's lowered gangway and waived to the Sudanese. Hastily he cheered: "Ahmaddulillah.....Praise be to God."

VI

Elena stood motionless at the eastern point exactly like Ayesha. Until the ship left the harbour, we could see the Sudanese crowd on the beach. Gradually it got dark—similar to Ayesha's colour.

Soon it deepened and became one with the Sudanese sky.

Chapter IV

THE DESERT ROAD

I

IT TOOK US FOUR MORE DAYS to enter the gulf of Suez. There was a fall in the temperature and the morning breeze became cool and refreshing. We felt more energetic and inspired to face the coming fight.

As usual, at dawn, I climbed the top deck for a walk and met the Chief Engineer of the ship who was a German. On our morning walks together we talked a good deal and had become good friends.

To our right, we saw a range of high mountains. This change of scenery from the monotony of wilderness to a natural architecture was pleasant to the eye. My German friend turned out to be not only an engineer but a good archaeologist who had travelled through these regions and knew every detail. Pointing towards a particular range he said: "Those are the Mountains of the Ten Commandments—holy ground of three religions—Jewish, Christian and Moslem. Around the Mountains is the Sinai Desert, the scene of the famous Exodus in the Bible."

Finding me interested in the Exodus story, he related: "And Moses led Israel onward from the Red Sea and they went out into the Wilderness of Shur; and they went three days into the Wilderness and found no water. Here lives the God of Wrath. Everything you will find in anger—the landscape, the wind, even the clouds. But Moses

supported the children of Israel in this wilderness for more than a generation."

"Now, I guess, it must be quite uninhabited."

"No", the engineer smiled, "this peninsula at Mount Sinai supports about 20,000 nomadic Bedouins. There is also an old monastery at Mount Sinai—the famous treasure-house of the early Christian Church."

"It is surprising how the Christian monks survived the hostility of the fanatic and ferocious Mohammedan Bedouins."

"The story of the monastery's survival is very interesting." He stopped near a lifeboat to relate: "Among all their Christian treasures the monastery has a very valuable Moslem script. They say, Hajrat Mohammad before he became the prophet, was a camel driver, who once lost himself in these mountains. The monks helped him, and in return for their hospitality secured from him a document which ordered his would-be followers never to violate the monastery at Mount Sinai. Since Hajrat Mohammad could not sign the document, he left an ink-print of his hand. Due to that ink-print, Mount Sinai has always been safe and on good terms with the Moslem Bedouins."

"Very interesting", I said and asked him, "could we not get a modern ink-print for the safe passage of the Greek girl on our boat?"

"I will think about it", he promised, and we parted for breakfast.

II

About midday when the ship berthed at Port Tewfik, the German engineer drew me aside and informed: "The Captain himself is much worried

about the stowaway on board. In no case will the Egyptian police allow her to set foot on land. Rather, they will force the Captain to return her to Saudi Arabian authorities, which will put the Captain in a very embarrassing position. So, he has decided not to disclose her presence to anybody."

"How can he manage it?"

"She has been locked in a secret cabin of the hold where nobody can reach her."

"But how long can you keep her there?"

"We have instructions to join the night convoy and proceed to Alexandria from Port Said. It will take us two days to reach there. Somehow or other we shall try to get rid of her at Alex."

It sounded alarming. I asked: "How will you manage it?"

"There are always some Greek vessels at Alex. She will have a few steps to go, to reach them, without coming into contact with the police."

"Will it be safe?"

"I see no danger," he assured, "in our own interests we shall have to take this course. You may come to Alex by land route and meet us there. If some unforeseen difficulty crops up, you may render her some help from the shore."

A policeman had already appeared to ask for my passport. I knew, they were fussy and reluctant to allow any foreigner to enter Egypt freely. They saw in each and every foreigner a cheat, smuggler and an ex-king Farouk's agent belonging to the "Muslim brotherhood" organisation.

I went along with the man to his officer to get myself cleared.

III

I had reasons to be irritated on my previous stops in Egypt. Since I was never accompanied by any lady, the question of their abduction by a troop of mounted Arabs and of securing their release by paying a large ransom, had never arisen. But still there were serious dangers to my purse. A number of uncalled-for guides, donkey-men and hotel agents had trapped me under their blackmailing net and extorted money without rendering or with little rendering of their annoying services. Once when I complained about it to a police officer at Port Said, he explained that the Egyptians were perfectly justified. "A people squeezed by the desert and infidel foreigners are compelled to take by molestation what is denied to them by so-called civilised methods."

This time I tried to remain more cautious and careful in my dealings with any Egyptian I came across. When they ultimately allowed me to enter Egypt after an ordeal of an hour's interrogation at the passport check-point and the customs, not without any sense of apprehension I decided to avoid all clamorous demands for baksheesh by everyone from little girls in a bazaar to an aged Mullah before a mosque. In preference to the congested trains I took the desert road to Cairo and further on to Alexandria.

IV

In a taxi leaving for Cairo the seat by the side of the driver was still vacant. A few minutes bargaining brought down the fare from five sterling notes to the usual half a sterling just in accordance with the old usages and traditions of the country.

The back seats were occupied by a fat gentleman

and a slim lady. The gentleman resembled the ex-king Farouk to a dot, with the same thick lips, broad nose and dark glasses. He wore the same kind of frock-coat with rounded skirt. The lady looked like Rita Hayworth dressed as Carmen. Finding me amazed, the gentleman introduced themselves: "Yes, your guess may be right—call us Farouk and Rita. We are artists known to all Egypt and to the entire desert world."

We had entered the desert all right. With the Suez Canal below eye level, we saw nothing but a solid expanse of desert where some ships were ploughing through the sand in an illusionary way. On the desert track we drove along at sixty miles an hour.

Our first stop was at a small oasis of date palms and an inviting sparkling pool. The driver tore off from a fallen sterile tree some tall leaves and made a mat on which we were to sit. He proposed that we take a couple of hours rest to save ourselves from fatigue and the desert heat. Farouk invited us to share his lunch of dates and slices of bread, saying: "This is all what remains today of the 'River of the Sun', one of the former branches of the Nile, which has now disappeared. Now we have a scheme to restore it by digging a fresh-water canal from the Nile near Cairo to the Mediterranean, west of Port Said."

"And when the canal is ready", Rita interrupted him, "we shall build at this very spot a *de luxe* hotel, settle down and make the desert bloom." She talked a good deal about her dreams and romantic future.

"But darling", Farouk stroked her bare shoulders, "I am afraid of the fierce and inhospitable nomads!"

There was not a cloud in the sky. The air had also stopped breathing. Beyond our palmgrove we

could see through a passage the dark sand of the desert spreading further than our sight could reach. The horizon seemed to end in a sea of dazzling looking-glass in every direction.

From an opening through the grove we saw a batch of desert Bedouins riding on their mules towards us. A herd of unloaded camels followed them. They surrounded the spring as if intending to camp there. From their movements it was difficult to decide whether they were friendly or hostile. After giving provender to their mules, their leader unfastened his scimitar from his waist and taking a few dates in his hand, asked: "Have you some *hashish* (an opium-like drug)?"

"No", Farouk replied on our behalf, "but we can offer you a few packets of cigarettes."

"Do you think, you can get away so cheap through the territories of our Sheikh Ishmael?"

"But we are poor artists", Farouk pleaded.

"None coming from the rich Nile is poor. You fellows at Cairo have grabbed all the wealth of the land and driven us out into the desert to starve and to die." Taking his scimitar in hand, the Bedouin commanded: "Come out quick! All weapons, ornaments, money and drugs. We have no use for other things at present."

"But we have none of the things you demand", the driver tried to convince.

"You cannot deceive us. We will keep your beautiful 'hur' until you bring forth a large ransom."

Rita gave a shriek. The Bedouin mimicked her: "Cries in the desert do not take you very far."

Anticipating such dangers, the Egyptians did not carry any valuables. They turned to me. My

travellers' cheques were of no use to them, but they demanded all bank notes in my pockets and my watch. To avoid any further trouble I had to hand them over these belongings. If we stayed longer, the chances were of further bargaining at my cost. Realising this danger, I asked the driver to make a move. As if they had established friendly relations with us, the Bedouins waved to us.

There was no point in discussing the incident further. I had violated the law of desert travel in not asking the driver to "keep moving." Safety in these regions lies in keeping out of range of any approaching band. So impatient did I become for the bustle and safety of city life that I pressed on the driver to reach Cairo non-stop, even at the cost of his machine getting heated.

With a feeling of dying a thousand deaths and of an escaped convict, we parked before a serai which was dilapidated and extremely dirty. Since I had not any cash left with me, I had to spend the night as the guest of the driver who generously offered to take me to Alexandria next day and to get his fare only when I had cashed my cheques there.

In spite of the beauty of the modern part of Cairo at night, which I had enjoyed on a previous trip, I felt, I had no strength left to take an evening walk. My fatigue was so great that I lay down on the front seat of the car, and fell asleep without taking any precaution for defending myself from the horrors of one of the most terrible slums situated in the largest city of the Arab world.

V

Next morning Farouk and Rita again occupied the

same seats in the car. He explained: "Alex is a better place to try our luck. The people there have European taste and they would enjoy our programme."

Again we had taken a desert road. Along the roadsides were placed oil drums painted white and filled with sand. These acted as guide posts for motorists. Halfway to Alexandria, there was a magnificent hotel where we had some refreshments. I was glad it was not an oasis inhabited by the ferocious Bedouins. When we were within sight of Alexandria, we saw, in the middle of Bedouin tents—they were beginning to build some huts. I wondered whether the nomads were going to stop wandering.

Eager to collect his fare and some bakhseesh for my safe trip, the driver took me straight to a travel bureau where I could cash my travellers' cheques. He had marked with greed that I had a number of them and thought himself justified in building some high hopes.

When I came back with the cash and offered him five pounds, he made a face as if I was the greatest cheat in the world. He said: "Is this the reward a foreigner gives for saving his life from the scimitar of a wild Bedouin?"

Farouk and Rita also expected their share for entertaining me on the trip. They expected me not only to pay the full fare of the taxi but also some twenty pounds for their good company. When I refused, Farouk threatened to hand me over to the police on a charge of kidnapping his companion. In consultation with the driver, they had prepared the whole case in advance.

This blackmailing would have robbed me of all

that was left by the Bedouins. Giving them to understand that I had to cash some more cheques, I returned to the counter of the travel bureau and asked the reasonable taxi fare for the trip I had made.

"You need not be robbed", the clerk advised, "I shall consult the special police officer appointed for such cases by the present revolutionary government."

Within a few minutes the officer sent an armed escort and asked us to appear in his office. When he heard the story of the trip, he asked one of his aids to bring the files of the Egyptians concerned. A short investigation made everything clear. The officer explained to me: "You have fallen a victim to an organised gang of crooks. Not for the first time have this couple played the role of 'hired lovers'. This is a refined way of robbing foreigners through taxi drivers. There are no Bedouins on that highway between the Suez and Cairo. They are all members of the same gang posted to rob the unawares."

Confronted with the evidence, my blackmailers admitted their crime. Their regret was that they had gone too far in their greed. But now it was too late for them to retract. They were under arrest to face a large number of more serious charges than mine, including those of murder.

When I came out of the police station, I began to see Egypt with changed eyes. For the first time I realised the magnitude of the great task the new revolutionary government had to undertake to make the life of its people safe in the country including the deserts.

VI

As arranged, I met the German engineer in a small cafe in the dock area. He gave me the news that Elena had been safely transferred to a ship which was going to touch Greece. Not interested in staying any further in Egypt, I too decided to board the same ship.

I went to the top deck. She awoke where she was hiding in the boat, breathless with fright. Her heart was beating violently. I saw her whole body trembling. Her head, her feet and her hands seemed to turn cold. But she recognised my voice.

"Thank God," she turned towards me. "We are at sea again...."

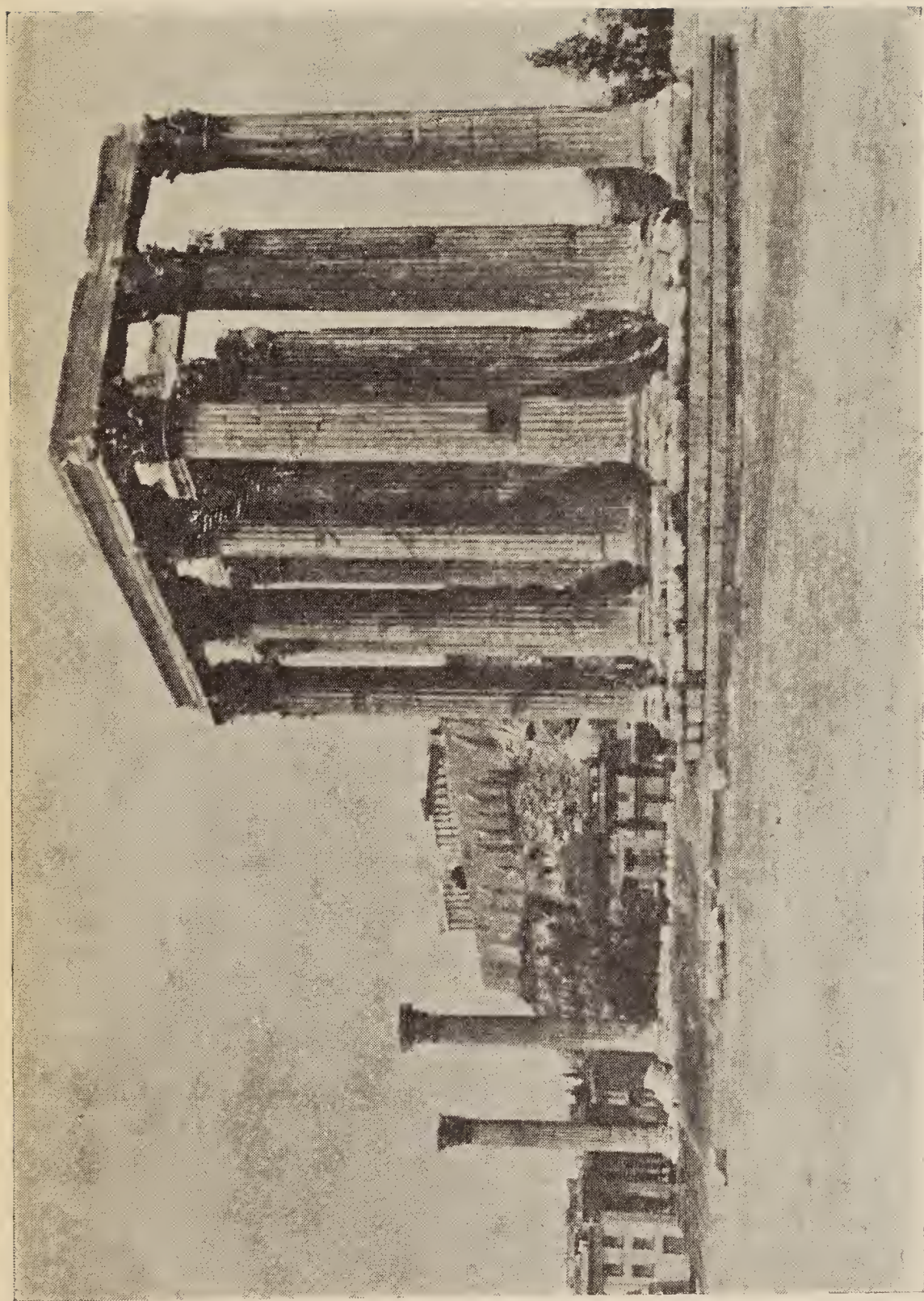
We had left the desert shore where Heaven and Earth were on fire. Before us was the crystal-blue Mediterranean.

Chapter V

UNDER THE SHADOWS OF ACROPOLIS

I

THE LANDSCAPE CHANGED. Now we were steaming along the southern coast of Crete. The earth here, dare not stop the magnificent cliffs of mountain ranges from raising their head over 8,000 feet high. Their long evening shadows fell steeply into the sea which had a depth of 11,000 feet quite close offshore according to the Ship's chart. The striking sight reminded me of the pure beauty of Greek architecture and the



Acropolis, Athens

supreme efforts of its people for the liberation of man's creative spirit.

For the moment Elena's eyes were focussed on a far away island. Her mind too floated in the distant past. "That must be the island where they brought the unfortunate Iphigenia to sacrifice, for the lucky sailing of the Greek fleet. The best of the Greeks are born to be sacrificed—formerly at the altar of the Gods, and now in the name of the King and the communists."

Her story unfolded the drama of the tragedies of present day Greece.

II

She came from Macedonia—the most primitive part of Greece. Originating from peasant stock, she had little choice about any change in the course of her life. The highest she could aspire was to get some employment in a local restaurant where a chance meeting with some traveller could have brought her to Athens—a paradise on earth.

It was all changed by the post-war turmoils in Greece. One day a batch of communist guerrillas, locally called "andartes" or bandits, raided her village. They left her parents behind, but took her along with other young people of the village off to a camp in the mountains. They taught her drill, shooting, the use of grenades and the laying of mines. She believed, they were going to drive away the invaders who had come to plunder the villages and kidnap young girls. On occasions, she participated in skirmishes against the Government troops. Finding her promising and reliable, the "andartes" sent her off to Bulgaria where she went to a communist school for subversive activities. On return she was assigned duties with the

guerrillas encircling Athens. There, one night while standing guard at an outpost carrying a gun on her shoulders and a dagger in her belt, she was captured by the Government troops. The prison camp where they put her was packed with regular criminals. A Greek court martial had pity on her, and gave her the light sentence of banishment to Cephalonia.

To begin a new life was out of the question. An association with men makes the rehabilitation of girls in Greek society extremely difficult. Elena had camped and marched with guerrilla troops, and so, she became a social outcast. While she was cursing her fate, Cephalonia was shaken by an earthquake on the 9th August, 1953. Thousands became homeless overnight. From every corner people cried: "Help Water We are sinking . ."

A Greek employee of the Suez Canal, who was on leave, brought Elena to Port Said in the hope of providing her with some job. But she had to put up in a hotel of bad repute. An Emir approached her there and promising to employ her as a cook, brought her to Jeddah and locked her up in his harem. Using some slave girls as couriers, she contacted the influential Greek, Popopolus, who organised her escape and return to her homeland.

All hardships suffered had left their mark on her face. On reaching home, she was afraid of a fresh trial for treason by the Government and for unchastity by society. The first sight of Greece did not thrill her. She asked repeatedly: "Will they allow me to land?"

III

At a sharp bend near the entrance to the port of

Piraeus I had the first hazy glimpse of Acropolis. Rushing to the port-hole I ripped the curtains open.

The rocks were bathed in melting gold. The marble sides sparkled. The rising sun was about to climb over them.

"Could you do me a favour?" Elena knocked at the port-hole. She looked agitated: "Father Athanasius can save me. I have heard a lot about him. Even if I am delivered to a monastery to serve as a nun the whole of my life, I am ready to accept it. At least I will enjoy the marvellous scenery and splendour of my homeland."

"Iphigenia had the same fate", a Greek sailor who was passing, stopped to comment. "I know the church where Father Athanasius serves. It is not very far from the market square at the foot of Acropolis. I am going that way, you may accompany me."

"Or we plan the otherway", Elena leaned through the port-hole into my cabin. "My Marius lives in a cave slum on the climb to Acropolis. Once I was engaged to him. May be, he will accept me back. Do not tell him about my Arabian misfortune."

"Will it be easy to find him out?"

"Quite easy. Ask anybody about Marius Russello who revives the ancient dances on Dionysian festivals, and they will show you his place."

As soon as the boat berthed at the *kai*, I landed with the sailor.

IV

We took an electric train which brought us to Plate Omonias in the centre of Athens. Through the most modern part of the city, we walked to Father

Athanasius's place. We blocked his way while he was descending the steps of the church. After giving us a patient hearing he said: "Your generation remembers God and His servants only when you are in dire need. Anyway, once you have approached Him, you cannot go back disappointed. I will do my best to bring her ashore. The matter about her life in Arabia will ruin her case. It is better she forgets all about it and begins her life afresh."

He called a taxi to take him to the port and asked us to call at his house later on. The sailor excused himself because he had only a few hours to visit his people before his boat sailed. At the foot of Acropolis we parted.

Before climbing Acropolis, I stopped at Theatre de Dionysos. About a dozen boys and girls attired in multi-coloured flowing tunics sang in chorus an old Greek song. A girl with bare legs and bare feet, and a boy in sandals, danced. A tall young man, with curly locks over his high forehead, and piercing eyes like the statue of Apollo, played the harmonica for them. When they had finished the piece to relax, I asked the young man to translate the text of the chorus for me. He explained: "This old hymn portrays the fright of the Greek maidens on the seashore when they see the Persians coming across the sea. The maidens gather around the altar of Zeus and pray for their protection. The God thunders. The Persian ships are jammed together and are shattered. The blue sea is free from the invaders. The maidens dance in relief and ecstasy."

"Are you not Marius Russello?", I enquired and gave him Elena's message. He jumped in surprise. "It is too phantastic to believe. People like her who

have gone through all the misfortunes and ordeals thrust upon us, will prove of great help in building up a new Greece. We must have her amongst us. She is ideally suited for the role of the dance of the 'Angel'."

The whole group went to the house of Father Athanasius. The Priest saw us through his window and came to receive us on the road. With a note of pride in his voice he communicated: "She is in my custody now."

Blocking our way he insisted upon our visiting his house and celebrating the occasion by having some of his wine.

When we came out, everyone danced each step of the way. Marius had an idea: "We must dance in the temple of Zeus and then proceed to Acropolis."

Even the enthusiastic crowd which accompanied the group substituted dancing for walking. There were marks of poverty and hardship on the faces of a number of people of the crowd. But they all looked as if they had just been resurrected. All the catastrophies of the recent past seemed to have vanished. For a while everyone was full of ecstasy and the joy of life.

In the temple of Zeus they pushed Elena to the forefront to dance. Sitting on the edge of a stone railing, Marius played music for her and at the end applauded with the rest of the crowd yelling loudly, "Revive Greece's greatness through pure art in life."

At sunset, when the lights diffused in soft purple on the marble structures, we mounted the last steps of the Propylaea, the gateway to the pure beauty of Greek architecture—the Parthenon.

"And here we must have a dance worthy of

Acropolis", said Marius and began to play his harmonica with a burning passion.

"The Angel! The Angel!", came voices from the crowd. Father Athanasius explained to me: "This dance is composed after an old Greek hymn, which tells of a mountain girl sitting in utter sadness and extreme desolation. There comes an Angel of Light who is all gentleness and sweetness, scattering happiness in abundance all around. The girl begins to dance to the tune of the heavenly melodies.

Elena's spirit had come to life again. Hundreds of men had joined in singing. From a whisper it rose higher and higher. Then it was transformed into a torrent sweeping away all barriers on the way. At its climax, I suddenly saw their two heads together, silhouetted against the last scarlet rays of the sunset.

It was painful as if someone had struck me unawares. I turned around and had the feeling of rolling down from the Parthenon's rock. My sailor friend showed me the golden rays over the sea: "Your boat leaves. . . ."

V

From the bend leading towards the open sea, I had the glimpse of Acropolis again. A roaring bonfire was set ablaze on the rocks. In its light I imagined the pure beauty of the Goddess Athena Nike who still inhabits the Parthenon temple. Before our boat dragged us away, the people standing at the promenade-deck said:

"Adieu, Glorious Athena."

And, we headed towards the Western World.

PART THREE

THE EUROPEAN SYMPHONY



Santa Maria de la Salute, Venice

Chapter I

MUSICALE VENEZIANO

I

MY VENETIAN GONDOLA drifted under the Rialto bridge. Through the arch I had a full view of the panorama along the Canal Grande. It looked like a romantic *scenario* in a State Opera.

Innumerable domes and palaces, towers and turrets raised their heads out of the waves. They looked delicate and fragile as blown glass. All around, the water city was decorated with fine lace-like carved arches. If there was no bustle and clamour of voices, one would really have lived in a fairy city of dreams.

On the terrace of Desdemona's Palace we saw a stately procession of exotic western beauties emerging from the opposite direction. In their colourful attire of all styles from Habsi to Hollywood, they looked very pretty and charming. With both hands they showered confetties on their admirers and, at intervals, to the tune of some eccentric music, showed their elastic curved poses, which had made them famous on the stage.

My gondolier reminded me of a painting of San Markus due to his curly hair falling on his quiet weather-tormented face. But now at the stroke of lyric singing of the stars to the accompaniment of the guitar and mandolin, he waylaid the gondola, and began to shout as in fits: "Che Bella! Bella! Gina

Lollobrigida! Bella Rita! Bella Ingrid! Bella, bella. . . . bella!"

One of the girls following the stars gave him a friendly smile and threw an orange in his hand. She had a bright young face, large blue eyes and a pretty mouth with thin arched lips.

"Grazie! Floria!", the gondolier raised his head saying, "che Bella Floria! Bella, bella."

The caryatid procession ascended a small side-canal bridge. Floria took them over in quick steps. The oar splashed. We rowed on.

II

Venice has its natural decorations—the wide expanse of the sea, the canals, the airy splendour and the brilliant skies. But these were the days of the film festival when the citizens had done their bit to exhibit their city at its best. In its multi-coloured robes, the glorious art capital of the Western world looked most attractive.

And now, on a little bend of the canal we saw the sign—"The House of Marco Polo." Seven hundred years ago here lived the supreme adventurer and the greatest traveller of our world. His narratives bring in sight of a modern man the first panorama stretching from the Andamans to the Arctic and from Italy to India and further on to Japan. Strangely enough, he reminds me of the true story of the safe journey of a maiden who travelled with a bag of gold, unescorted, unmolested, from Peiping to Moscow or to Teheran all along the Chinese, Indian and the Arabian coasts. Leaning back among the cushions of the gondola, I tried to visualise what lay in store for a

modern star in case she tried to follow the same routes, trodden once by Marco Polo himself!

Smoothly we drifted awhile and swayed away from the noisy localities. When I glanced up, I saw that the canal widened between our gondola and the shore. With surprise I asked the gondolier: "Are you not taking me to San Marco?"

"Yes, along the Canal Grande."

"But is there not a short cut?"

"There is. But that leads through a troubled area."

"Typhus-infected?"

"Worse than that—communist-inhabited."

"Are they shooting any trouble now?"

"Of course, they are", the gondolier replied, splashing some more water with his oars. "They are going to blow up Teatro Rossini."

"What wrong has the theatre done?"

"The Communists say some anti-Soviet film is going to be shown there. This afternoon some American stars who have participated in the film are going to inaugurate the show, and the Communists are going to attack and break the spectacle."

"Interesting." I felt my seat in the gondola soft, luxurious and relaxing, and wished the trip lasted longer. "Will you take this side-canal—Rio di San Luca?"

"If the Signore wishes", the gondolier replied taking a turn, "I do."

III

The Piazza San Benedetto before Teatro Rossini was full of communist demonstrators. They shouted with clenched fists and demanded that the film be handed over to them for a bonfire right at the square.

When a couple of actresses appeared at the balcony, they were hooted down with filthy language. A batch of flagbearers knocked the main gate with their poles and forced it open. The glasses of the Teatro were smashed to pieces. It seemed some windows were going to give way.

At that moment, a squadron of "carabinieri" appeared from San Angelo side, and marched forward to clear the entrances to the square. Some women screamed: "Assassins!" A number of red flags appeared in the windows of the neighbouring houses. The crowd smelt blood. The approaches to the Piazza began to turn into barricades. Big stones were torn up from the street, a gas lamp was wrenched away, some railings on the gate were broken up and used as missiles. A few comrades had brought some weapons in their pockets, which they now whipped out.

Suddenly, a door of the Teatro was torn open. A great rush of people from inside pushed out. Someone shouted from the housetop: "The show has been cancelled. Do not molest the stars."

With the help of the "carabinieri" which had reached the main gate a cordon was created to allow a file of frightened stars to pass through. Last of all to come out was the fair Floria, who broke the cordon to make her way stright to the canal. She slang the people about her and got rather roughly mauled. Hurling insults at the "carabinieri" as well as the people, she ultimately succeeded in wriggling through to the quay. Only one man with a red flag followed her shouting, "How could you follow degenerate bourgeois stars, 'ballado come dei pazzi', dancing like mad people?"

"Rot", replied Floria and signalled my gondolier to row away fast. The red-flagged man went on threatening: "Anyhow, you will have to explain your action before our Party people's court."

"Communist cattivo" (communists are bad), said the gondolier, spat into the canal and repeated, "tutti comunisti cattivo! (all communists are bad) Cattivo!"

IV

We passed through a number of small narrow canals and halted at the Piazzetta. The landing place was between the columns of the lion and the saint on the shore. To the left the scene was dominated by the grand structure of Santa Maria della Salute on one side of the canal and to the right was the palace Duggal adjoining the Bridge of Sighs. The grand Piazza San Marco was dominated by doves and human beings in flocks, quite peacefully strolling, unconcerned about what happened in the neighbourhood or in the wide world beyond the seas. As I was helped to shore by an old man with a boat-hook, a usual feature at landing-stages in Venice, the bells from the balloon-shaped Basilica began to ring "Ave Maria." The gondolier asked in a curt voice: "Shall I take Signore's luggage to an *albergo*?"

Somehow, I did not like the idea of going to a hotel at the moment. The gondolier understood it and solved my problem with the suggestion: "The Signore will find Lido more comfortable. Most of the festival guests are putting up there."

"But will it not be more convenient for me to reach there by Vaporetto?"

"The Signore cannot use Vaporetto because it does

not take luggage. I am a good rower. I will row you well, Signore."

"Lido is a better place to stay at", Floria too supported him. "If the Signore so desires, I shall help him in finding a room facing the sea."

In any case I had to take a gondola to get a full view of San Marco from the sea. The oars splashed again and our gondola moved towards Lido.

V

Friends had warned me to beware of Lido. They said that there was a notorious spot where one could easily fall into the clutches of a criminal. For extorting money from the foreigners the Italians had built up a number of novel entrapments there. But in spite of that, the Isola of Lido was supposed to be the loveliest on the Adriatic coast. For me, my luxurious seat in the gondola, the new surroundings and the warm evening were too enjoyable to get excited about any unpleasant experience which might be in store for a stranger.

The muttering had begun anew. The gondolier complained about the rising prices of macaroni and the stingy tips of the visitors.

"You are right", Floria replied. "Venice is a very pleasant place for the class which amuses, but for those who work, it is a hard lot."

"Do you live at Lido, Signorina?" I enquired.

"Not so rich!" she smiled. "I work in a photo studio. At night I return to the slum-like houses of Santa Maria Maddalena. With the amount an average visitor spends in a day, at Lido we live for the whole month...."

"Our Bella Signorina!" the gondolier interrupted

her, "you will soon have a villa at Lido—La Bella Floria."

"Not until I get some of Mussolini's hidden treasures!"

"That also the bella Signorina may get."

"How?" she asked looking towards the approaching Lido shore. "My fiancé knew something about it from his partisan fighting days. The day he ventured to linger around the areas where the treasures are supposed to be buried, he vanished."

"Signor Enrico has vanished?" the gondolier asked, surprised.

"He has not returned since."

"Where could he be?"

"My enquiries reveal, he has been taken somewhere behind the iron-curtain."

"Why behind the iron-curtain?" I asked her.

"The hidden treasures are the property of the Cominform. They hope that those funds will finance communist revolution in Italy. That is why they are so strictly guarded. Anybody supposed to have any inkling of those treasures just vanishes from the western world."

"Anyhow", the gondolier requested, "in case you get rich, employ me in your service, bella Floria!"

"I do not think of getting rich. My next plan is to make a trip to the east to find out my fiancé."

"Let us hope, you will succeed", the gondolier told her helping her on shore. She asked him to take my valise to Pension Paradiso.

"How much do you ask for the trip?" I asked the gondolier. Gazing out over his head he calculated and asked for a small amount considering the length

of the trip. I put also some extra tips into the hat he held out.

He thanked me and continued his blessings: "Addio, Signore, addio e presto ritorno! Addio Bella, bella Floria! Arrividerla, presto ritorno! La Madonna vi accompagni...."

VI

The room in Pension Paradiso was a pleasant one with lofty windows looking out to sea. The night being dark, one could not see very far in that direction, but the noise of the breakers made it clear that the distance to the beach was only a short jump. Down below, the terrace resounded with singing, laughter and music. *La musica! Evviva la Musica!*

I came out with exposed films to hand them over to Floria to develop them. She awaited me in a corner under the shadows of the lemon-trees. When I asked her pardon for having kept her waiting, she replied: "It does not matter. I will be spending the night in my studio, since I am afraid of returning home."

"Why afraid?"

"Because I cheered and accompanied stars participating in a film the communists have declared anti-Soviet, they have threatened me with punishment. I wish I could escape."

"But you have not committed any crime?"

"They are after me since my fiancé disappeared on a trip to Vienna. I was myself thinking of going to Vienna to bring him back. The communists have only forced me to start sooner."

From the shore we heard somebody singing in a non-Italian tune. I asked her whether she knew the song.

"It is Schubert's Serenade." She sang while repeating, "Leise flehen meine Lieder...."

"You seem to know German well?"

"I come from the Tyrol where they speak German. That is why Vienna too has much attraction for me."

"Why do you not go there?"

"You have to pass through Russian control points which are not easy. But I may try this time. Do you think I shall succeed?"

We looked for the reply towards the sea. When nothing came about, we parted in silence.

As soon as I was alone in my room, I went up to one of the windows and looked towards the dark sea in the distance. Far, far away some flickers appeared. Perhaps from a passing ship.

"What on earth was I doing here?"

Gradually the flickers faded away. Along with all realities, momentarily, everything for me vanished into dreamland.

Chapter II

FESTA TRIESTINO

I

THE BASILICA BELLS announced the dawn of a great day. The return of Trieste to Italy was the happiest day for the whole country during all the post-war years. Today the whole of Venice was to get on wheels with flags, silk hangings, fireworks and bands to re-embrace Triestinos.

In the fresh morning breeze I sat down under a big lemon tree picking up the "Figaro", and asked for some breakfast. The newspaper was full of rejoicing in Trieste at the departure of allied troops and war-ships. Suddenly my eyes fell on a news item on the last page under the headlines: VENETIAN BEAUTY ACCUSED.

"Signorina Floria Vittoli, a Venetian studio girl has been accused of throwing acid bottles on the demonstrators against a mad parade of some foreign immoralists. There is an order of arrest against her, but it is feared, she has already left Venice. Signorina Vittoli is also accused of some very serious communist activities involving a number of murders."

My first reaction was—it cannot be true. Had she not an absolutely innocent face? Besides, I was an eye-witness of the role she played in yesterday's demonstrations. But do the faces of these South Europeans not deceive one? They are capable of singing the sweetest melodies, while thrusting a knife into their sweetheart. Many times we have seen such scenes in the Operas.

II

An inner impulse made me feel wretched. All at once the Lido shores lost all charm for me as if I had enough of them during a night's stay. After a little racking of brains my goal emerged beyond the foggy sea. Of course Trieste, the natural entrance to Central Europe.

In haste, as if I had to catch a train, I paid my bill, and asked the pension porter to take my valise to the

gondola landing. On my way I thought of collecting my films.

As there was nothing coherent in my mind, I walked slowly. When some gondolas were already in sight, I felt a light tap on my shoulder and turning around saw Floria. In the soft hazy light of the morning, her face recalled Aphrodite of Greek sculpture—but with an agitated expression.

"I had to pack up a good deal", she said a little out of breath from walking fast. "You know, I have been meanly denounced to the police, they will put me in jail if they catch me."

"What have you decided?"

"To keep on moving until I cross over the frontiers."

A number of gondoliers encircled us and began to quarrel in their dialect. Floria showed them her luggage already composed on the beak of the gondola we had used the previous day. We were helped on the vessel by the same old gondolier, Rudolfo, who greeted us through the opening of curly locks falling on his face. "Buon giorno, signorino! Buon giorno—bella Floria. Last night a Triestino guest entertained me with half a kilo of macaroni and vino a volonta, and the whole night I dreamt of you."

"Rudolfo!" Floria interrupted him, "they are after me."

"The cattivo communisti?"

"Yes, and the police."

"They will never get you." Rudolfo smiled. "You can live with me. I will take you to coral-fishing, and you can help us in smuggling to earn your living."

"No, you are taking us to Piazzale Roma, you know."

The gondolier muttered approval between his

teeth, the oar splashed and the shores of Lido were left behind.

Relaxing luxuriously in the gondola seats we planned our trip.

"Why not drive to Trieste today?" she suggested. "We can stay at 'Castello Miramare' and see the celebrations."

"It fits in with my plan."

"The gardener of the castle is my uncle. You can have the best view of the Adriatic from his rooms. Besides, that will be the safest resort for me."

The gondola crossed the lagoon and reached San Marco. Here the gondolier asked whether we would care to have some *vino* at the Piazza. We had no time. Neither had we time to feed the doves or to see the artistic designs of the lace-makers or the glass-blowers. We quietly passed the heart of Venice through the innumerable windings of many canals, beneath balconies of marble traceries flanked by carved lions. Somehow, we felt gloomy at the thought of leaving Venice.

Rudolfo threw his boat-hook at a staircase near some slippery walls in the rocking water and carried our luggage to the first bus leaving for Trieste. Handing us two front-seat tickets the conductor congratulated us: "An excellent choice for honeymoon to Trieste! The jewel of the Adriatic! What a glorious day! Trieste back to Italy."

"Keep some money for Festa di Trieste", Rudolfo said refusing to accept any money. "Pagherete un'altra volta, (you pay me another time). Addio bella Floria! Arrividerla signorino! Sant Marco vi benedica! Addio e presto ritorno...."

We were touched by his friendliness. He waited in

his gondola until our Autobus departed. With the oar raised high in his hand he waved to us till we were out of sight. Floria signalled in reply: "Yes, we are coming back soon. Very soon."

III

At the bend of Monfalcone we had the first grand view of the Adriatic. From a hill-top nearby, the silhouette of the port of Trieste was discernible. But more clearly was visible a flowery castle emerging right from the sea. Pointing it out Floria whispered: "Miramare."

"Lucky people who live there."

"Just the opposite. All those to whom the Castello Miramare belonged, met with a most tragic end."

"To whom does it belong now?"

"During Mussolini's regime the Duke of Aosta was the owner of the castle, and you know what fate he had in Africa."

"That is the fate of all those who try to rob other people", an old man sitting next to us said. "We had lost Trieste as well due to the Fascist D'Annunzio's greed to rob Rijeka from the Yugoslavs. They brought also ruin to our greatest ship-building yards of this Monfalcone."

Immediately after the war, when I had passed this way, Monfalcone had looked like a grave-yard. Now it was throbbing again with activity. A large number of workers today were on their way to Trieste for the "Festa".

The drive further on was right along the coast. The reflection of red coastal rocks on the deep azure of the sea created images like Venetian glasses. But

these looked so elastic that they immediately joined up as soon as they were broken.

Now, we rolled down a hill. The entrance to Trieste was blocked by people. They shouted in great excitement: "La Processione! Esce la Processione! The procession is coming out."

"They are going to the cathedral for a thanksgiving service", the bus driver explained to us. "The road will not be open for hours. But why should you miss the festa? You may go now anywhere you like and collect your luggage from the terminal later on."

It was a good idea to join the people. We selected a vantage point to see the procession. First appeared small children decorated as angels with wings. They sang a hymn. Madonnas followed blessing the crowd. The rear was brought up by the priests in their colourful robes of the Middle Ages.

We guessed, there were no chances of entering the cathedral in that rush. It was advisable to follow the band in their glittering uniforms. They said, they were going to a "concerto."

The place selected for the concert was a grand park on top of a hill in the centre of the city. From here we could see far, far away in all directions. The bright city lights reminded me of our Divali festival. Those on the shore illuminated the Adriatic for a considerable distance. The waves too seemed to join in the festivities.

The band played in the centre of the park. According to the demands of the people the majestic band-master raised his baton and directed pieces from operas or folksongs. When *La Traviata*, *Tosca* and *Rigoletto* were finished he turned to *polka* and *mazurkas*. All assembled there, danced.

Vino for the band was provided free. And this in turn increased the tempo uninterrupted till midnight when the fireworks started and illuminated the whole sky. Crackers after crackers exploded in the air to the glory of *Italia*.

When everything was quiet again, then too, nobody thought of returning home. The band-master played "tarantellas" and many who had special talents came forward to exhibit their boisterous skill. Someone looking for a partner pulled out Floria. She danced for a while, but when her eyes fell on the face of her partner, she nearly shrieked, and getting rid of him tried to disappear in the crowd. Others were still in high tempo, so she could leave them unnoticed. She rushed out greatly agitated.

"What has happened?" I asked her.

"They are following me", she whispered. "Did you not see the fellow who pulled me to dance was the same who had threatened to punish me?"

Pushing some drunken ones to the side, we ran downhill as fast as we could.

IV

Although nobody followed us, she was not inclined to spend the night at Trieste. Terribly scared she looked.

While we waited to collect our luggage at the terminal, we saw some people getting into a station wagon with an Austrian number. Floria asked them whether they could drop us at "Miramare" on their way.

"Miramare?" a man sitting by the side of the driver replied, "of course! With the greatest pleasure. We

were just talking something very interesting about 'Miramare'."

"Yes, I know the place", Floria said when the car moved. "Various interesting legends are attached to it. According to one, Emperor Tiberio threw a girl he was annoyed with from the terrific cliff at Capri into the sea. As the girl was innocent, the angels helped her, and safely floating, she landed at 'Miramare'. Since her own people did not come to take her back, her soul still hovers around the place and brings bad luck to those who venture to disturb her solitude."

The lights were switched off after the *festa* had officially terminated. In the darkness, "Miramare" looked like Tiberio's cliff. The sea heaved below.

"I am afraid of this place." Floria asked the people in the car: "Would you mind if we went further with you?"

"There is enough room in the car", they replied. "You may come with us to Graz, if you wish!"

Comfortably we stretched ourselves in the station wagon. The wheels rattled. The unfortunate soul of "Miramare" flashed before our eyes. Then slowly we dozed off.

Chapter III

ON THE BLUE DANUBE

I

THE COLD FRESH AIR of the Karawanken Alps awakened us with a shiver. Tarvisio, the last Italian town was left behind, and now we were approaching a high mountain pass to cross over into Austria. The frontier guards checked our papers and waved us on with a friendly "Gruss Gott" (Greet God).

The green ribbon-like river Schlitza showed us the way, where in the distance, a white peak hovered in the background of a rosy sky. Drinking in the cool air in ecstasy, Floria talked to herself: "This is what I had so longed for."

Reaching a dark green lake, the Woerthersee, we stood by a table, out in the open air, and took some coffee with creamy milk which had also the fragrance of the grass and the flowers of the fields. The Austrian party we accompanied consisted of young men and girls on a week-end holiday rejoicing trip. Pointing out the characteristic features of the landscape before us they asked: "Do these vineyards not look as if they are drunk with music? It is typical Viennese Grinzing."

"Only if our neighbours did not disturb us!", said our peasant host. "They want to truncate this province of Carinthia from the rest of Austria and its capital Vienna."

"Freedom, peace and friendship", someone from our party said. "This is what we feel must be realised

so that we may contribute to culture of whatever we are fit for."

When we got into the station wagon again, they related to us the border conflict they had with Yugoslavia and the difficulties the Russians were creating in signing the peace treaty with Austria.

"What about the travel restrictions to Vienna?" Floria enquired. "Do the Russians still drag away passengers from the trains on the pretence that their papers are not in order because they are not written in Russian?"

"Thank God, conditions have become normal now. Usually, there are now no difficulties at the Russian check points."

"And how are conditions in Vienna itself?"

"The cases of people disappearing from the western sectors have also become rare."

"Seems reassuring?"

"Vienna is an excellent choice for this part of the year. It is irresistibly attractive. Vienna, wine and music—a paradise on earth. Only disturbing factor is that they have introduced vodka in society. One must be a bit careful about that, since one cannot be sure where the vodka will land him."

The whole day we drove through the picturesque landscape of Carinthia and later on through Styria. The waving fields, the winding streams and the blue line of hills hovering on the far horizon, absorbed us completely. Then, in the evening, we reached Graz where we took leave of our station wagon friends at the railway station and boarded a night train for Vienna.

Early morning, the train passed through the Viennese woods, and when the cross at the pinnacle of

Saint Stepan appeared tinged in the rosy dawn, we felt as if we had actually reached a new world long dreamt of.

II

Looking at the fountain by Raphael Donner from the Cafe Astoria, we had our breakfast. Floria's *friseur* as well as her looks resembled the bronze statue, expecting from the morning rays a new hope and happiness. We turned first towards the newly reconstructed State Opera House and then towards the Ring, where we sat down under the Beethoven Monument to consider our next step.

A military police jeep with one occupant each from the four powers—the Soviet Union, U.S.A., Britain and France—passed through the Ring which reminded us that at the moment we were in the International Sector. Floria had a sudden inspiration: "Before I run out of pocket I must find out Enrico. Here they must have some organisation to help persons like myself. 'I would better try with the Westerners, can you not help me a little in contacting the Russians?'"

"I shall try."

Arranging to meet in a Hungarian restaurant for supper, we started off in opposite directions.

III

Walking through the Kaerntnerstrasse in the heart of Vienna, I recollected my last trip when I had met an excellent example of Slav youth in a Soviet bookshop located there. He had newly arrived from Leningrad and was posted at the information desk where he was of much use to the visitors due to his good knowledge of the Russian language. Particul-

arly striking were his large black eyes, luxuriant curls and magnificent features. Easily he would have posed for the romantic poet Lensky in Pushkin's "Eugen Onegin." From the first day of our acquaintance we had become good friends, and I turned to Vasya for a number of intriguing problems of the Soviet life.

"What a pleasant surprise?" He greeted me. "I often thought, where could you have vanished? Do we go on the old Danube to celebrate this reunion?"

It was a good proposal. On a bright summer day there is nothing more pleasant in Vienna than to get into a boat and to drift leisurely along the flow of the river. One could dream, plan and solve all the problems under the sky.

We took a tram along the Ring, passed the grand Ferris Wheel at Prater, crossed the bridge of the Red Army and settled down in a light sailing boat. Now, we had successfully escaped the prison of the streets, the grimy houses and the smoky industrial localities.

Vasya related the joy of the Soviet citizens when they were relieved from the surveillance of the secret police after the liquidation of Beria. I interrupted him. "Did it bring any change in the fate of those detained foreign nationals who had disappeared in the Eastern sectors?"

"A number of such cases are being reviewed and all those who were falsely implicated are being released."

I asked him about Enrico's case, telling him all the details I knew about him. He closed his eyes for a moment, overcame his reluctance after some fight and said in a confessing tone: "Perhaps I know this case. It was quite different from the usual ones. For

some reason, I may now tell you all about it. Those days I had connections with our Intelligence Department. Working in a foreign languages bookshop, my dealings were mostly with the foreigners. We gave Enrico some employment in our bookshop. But he was a tough fellow. He would not agree to work as our secret agent in Italy. He was also immune to the influence of our girl employees. We transferred him to our Berlin branch for some further training. There he got involved in the June 1953 revolts, and was sent to a 'cure house'."

"Concentration camp, you mean?"

"Yes, a concentration camp in Western terminology if you prefer to call it so."

"Is he still there?"

"Some friends who recently have turned up say that he has been released, but does not intend returning to Italy, and is now working in a bookshop in some health resort of East Germany on the Baltic Coast."

"Floria will remain life-long grateful to you for this news."

"I am simply serving my Government. Now, its policy is to rectify all wrong done to innocents by Beria and his cruel henchmen. But in spite of that, you do not know when and where we Soviet citizens may land according to the whim of our superior party bosses. The best thing is that we forget I have ever told you about any foreigner who disappeared in Vienna. We will pose as casual literary friends as before, so that I may not have any trouble for the help rendered in a particular case."

"You will never be betrayed by your grateful

friends," I assured him. We entered a cafe in a cool shady spot on the banks of the Danube.

Till evening we sailed around a number of picturesque islets. It was a day spent on a water festival.

In the evening we went together to the Restaurant Budapest.

IV

Floria was already there talking to the conductor of the orchestra. The lights were dim but multi-coloured like a colourful gypsy garment. The walls were decorated with Hungarian scenes—a peasant playing on the dusty road or a gypsy caravan camping by the riverside.

On our way we had also picked up Ushi, Vasya's Viennese assistant. She was a type who could impress as an intimate friend from her first gaze. No sooner had we introduced ourselves and taken our seats than she began to narrate her "secrets." "They were selecting delegates to the Berlin Youth festival, and they dared to reject me. I rushed straight to the Youth Organisation leader and gate-crashed into his office. He saw that justice must go in favour of the Viennese charms. At midnight I am leaving for Berlin."

"Molodyets, Ushi! (Bravo)", Vasya congratulated her. "We will celebrate your victory with some vodka."

"No Vasya! As a Viennese I cannot let down our wine."

"Fine. Let us select the best quality."

While they discussed the qualities of wine and vodka, I gave Floria the good news. The effect was like an electric shock. She sprang up in enthusiasm

and told the conductor of the orchestra to play a gypsy song of love. Ushi who knew some, suggested: "Dear, dear pigeons—little lovers from afar...."

It was a melody full of passion and emotion. Dragging Ushi along, Floria leaped onto the stage. "We must improvise 'The Blue Danube'."

They waltzed to Strauss' music with the vision of the flowing Danube and sunshine and ripples before our eyes. The audience joined in. No night club or opera danceuse could have surpassed this dance of the triumph of life.

Shortly before midnight we came out still waltzing into the streets. At the monument of Johann Strauss we still felt the musician's swaying melody. This was Ushi's turn to pull Floria with her. "You must come to the Berlin festival and right away with me."

"I can fix you up with the travel papers through the People's Democratic Republics", Vasya offered. "As a delegate to the youth festival you will not have any difficulties on the way."

Floria herself did not need any extra persuasion. Only when she got into the train did she turn aside for a moment to ask me: "Can it be true? Or is it a trap?" Without waiting for the reply, she continued: "Anyway, I do not want to disappear without a trail. Let us fix up a rendezvous in Berlin—Cafe Wien in the West sector or Restaurant Budapest in the East."

The signals had already turned green. Leaning out of the window she asked: "Do we meet again?"

"God willing", the train conductor tried to assure.

The wheels rolled. She looked on. We waved her good-luck till she disappeared from sight.

Chapter IV

TRIP TO BERLIN

I

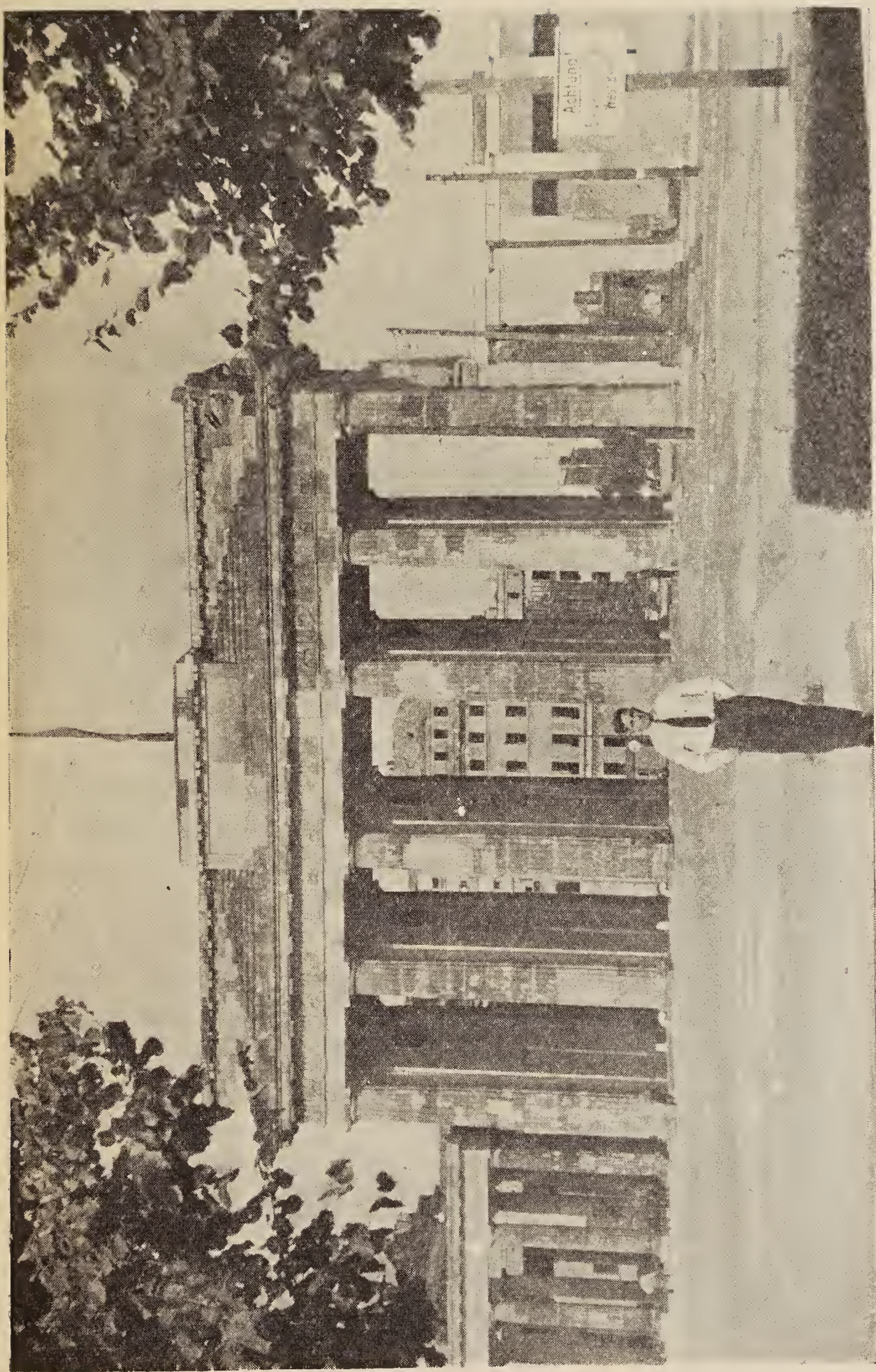
THE VILLA I SLEPT IN was facing the Danube. All night I had been in a gondola on the old Danube, asking the gondolier to row, in a dream. In the morning a ship passed, and it seemed as if the Captain standing on the bridge asked me: "Guess, where we are going today?" The propellers while cutting ripples seemed to produce *Adagio* from the *Sonata Pathétique* of Beethoven.

Vasya had promised to come at breakfast, and we were to go together on a Danube trip to the east. When he did not turn up although the sun had climbed quite high, I came out of the villa to meet him in the street. But there, somebody else approached me and asked in Russian: "Vashi Dokumenty? (May I see your papers?)".

He was in a Soviet military police uniform. I showed him my passport. After scrutinising it minutely, he returned it and asked me to proceed further. Clearly, I apprehended some danger ahead.

At the next corner, a car with a Norwegian diplomatic number was being tanked. The driver asked me whether I was not looking for the Russian bookshop manager. Getting an affirmative reply, he told me to get into the car. There, covering his head with a hat sat Vasya, who whispered to the driver: "Straight to the West, please!"

He practically held his breath until we crossed the



Brandenburgertor, Berlin

Enns bridge, the Russian zone border, and entered the western zones. There he admitted: "Now, the atmosphere here is not oppressive like Vienna."

"Are you happy?"

"Happy and miserable at the same moment."

"Typical Russian!"

"We Russians have deep roots in our soil. Once I have jumped over the fence, I cannot dream of returning to the country I was born in, nor can I meet and talk to anyone from there."

"Why did you take this step?"

"I have been forced to it. After the liquidation of Beria, I thought it would not be obligatory for Soviet citizens to denounce their friends and dear and near ones to the secret police. But the apparatus has not changed. Last night on my return from the station, I was called to the Commandatura and interrogated till dawn. I was charged with being a Fascist agent because I did not expose any foreigner as a western agent or convert anyone as our own agent. All my foreign-national friends are supposed to be vicious anti-Soviet intelligence men in the eyes of my Russian superiors. Any contact with them is a conspiracy. For these reasons, orders were for my recall to Moscow. You know, what this recall means? It may cost one's head or one may be banished to Siberia. Fortunately, I had my Norwegian diplomat friend who lent me his car to reach Munich. My superiors had given me only a couple of hours to get ready until the plane left for Moscow. Now, they might be making frantic search for me."

"Will you be safe at Munich?"

"Absolutely. There those who have deserted earlier have formed an organisation to help newcomers."

Our car had stopped at a railway crossing. A young face peeped through a window of a passing train. Before my eyes swam the image of the Italian girl—"What will be her fate in Berlin?"

"Quite unpredictable", Vasya replied shaking his head.

Since my student days it was mostly in Berlin that I had gone through a number of thrilling experiences connected with the unusual developments taking place in that historic city. The difficulty had been that before I could become fully conscious of it, I used to get far adrift into the thick of the fight.

Anyhow, during this trip, Berlin was on my way to the Arctic which I had planned to reach.

II

All did not go so well with Vasya as he had imagined on the West German border. They detained him to get his entry permit from their superiors. The waiting made him nervous. "Perhaps my action has been too hasty. May be my return to Moscow would not have turned out so bad. Should I not return?"

He had not come to any decision when a German police officer informed him: "Please report to the Reichshof hotel in Munich. You will be received there."

"And no armed guards to accompany me?" Vasya asked.

"My instructions are", the officer replied, leading us to our car, "no guards are necessary for you."

"Quite a suprising system." Vasya was puzzled. "It seems they are not going to hand me over to the American Intelligence Officers!"

At the Munich hotel too, a German civilian met

him, and communicated: "Night you will spend in this hotel, and tomorrow we proceed to Frankfurt/Main."

"Now I understand", Vasya turned to me. "Perhaps the American Intelligence headquarters are situated at Frankfurt."

But at Frankfurt too no Americans came to receive him. Another German civilian who was awaiting him there informed him: "My instructions are to take you to Berlin by the evening plane."

Vasya got worried: "Are they going to hand me over to the Russian authorities?"

"No such fears", the German who had overheard him, comforted, "after the German Intelligence Chief has gone over to the East, we are re-investigating a number of cases of those who are supposed to have disappeared in the Soviet sector. Your statements may be helpful to those who are trying to return back to freedom."

During the flight the clouds cleared on the northern horizon, and Vasya too concluded: "My fate in the West depends upon the fate of those whom I have helped in their travels through the Eastern republics. I have always acted in good faith, none of those individuals have ever been put to trouble on my account. You know the example of that Italian girl?"

"I wonder, what is her fate in the Eastern sector!"

"If anything happens to her, neither you nor anybody in the Western world will ever believe that there could be some Soviet individuals who genuinely try to serve humanitarian motives."

"Let us hope for the best." The German accompanying us, assured him once more.

It was getting dark when our plane touched the

Tempelhof airport of Berlin. Under a clear sky the lights were so reassuring that one could not suspect that any crimes could be committed under them.

Keeping Cafe Wien as a contact place with Vasya, we parted.

III

Walking under the glittering lights of the Kurfuerstendamm, one realised to what extent West Germany had advanced towards a new prosperity. All bombing scars except of the Kaisersgedechtnis church were healed. Centrally situated Cafe Wien looked like a jewel house where gala parties had begun to get hilarious at midnight. Dinners served were also sumptuous.

Seeing the crowds awake, I did not feel like retiring. No message was there for me, so I came out for a walk again. Around the corner was a car-lending garage run by an ex-major in Hitler's army, and my trusted chauffeur during my previous stay in Berlin. The lights in his office showed that he was in. Through the open doors he beckoned: "Herr Doctor.... It is a pity to remain inside when the night is so lovely."

"Quite right, Karl!"

"Do we drive to the Soviet sector?", he asked, knowing my choice of the previous years.

"Are they not sealed off?"

"Just the contrary. Much tension has eased, and the checks at the sector-borders have become normal. Now you can travel there even in a car with a western number plate."

We drove off in one of his cars. For a moment he stopped at the signpost—"Here you leave the

Western sector.” I looked at the roadsign and found that the “Charlottenburger-Chausse” was changed into the “Road of the 17th of June.” The massive pillars of the Brandenburgertor stood before us. Beyond that was the Eastern sector, beginning with the broad avenue Unter-den-Linden. All road lamps were brightly lit illuminating the ruins of the former American Embassy and the Hotel Adlon at the corner of the Wilhemstrasse which led to the former Hitler Chancellery. A little further up the long and newly built massive Soviet Embassy building obstructed and stopped all further vision. Surprisingly enough, not a single sign of life was visible anywhere. Only when we had crossed the Brandenburger gate, two VOPO’s (East German people’s police) came out from the shade of the pillars, and checked our papers. With a friendly smile they asked us to proceed further.

“This road used to lead to Siberia”, Karl reminded.

“Where does it take one now?”

“Only to the Stalin-Allee.”

“Let us first turn to Hitler-Allee (Avenue)—I mean, the Wilhemstrasse.”

This street was very heavily bombed. The palace of the President of the German Republic was in ruins. Beside that was the spot, where, it is said, Hitler was burnt. Nothing remains of the old Reichs Chancellery or of the “Hitler-bunker.” We turned into Friedrichstrasse and came back to Unter-den-Linden to see the Opera, the State library and the Berlin University buildings. They were all badly battered, but their architecture and style still reminded one of the great contribution they used to make in the development of human civilisation. Further up, the beautiful palace of the former German Kaisers was

completely razed to the ground. Around Alexanderplatz too it was very calm. It looked as if all these areas had been excavated by archaeologists after remaining for centuries under the earth.

Now, straight ahead was the famous Stalin-Allee. All the building construction of the Soviet zone seemed to be concentrated here. On both sides of the road stood long rows of multi-storied buildings. Karl said: "All the flats on this avenue are reserved for the important members of the communist party."

Another few minutes drive brought us to the Budapest situated in the centre of the long Stalin-Allee. In contrast to Cafe Wien of the Western Sector, the Budapest gave an impression as if it was the gathering place of international conspirators. The music was only a side attraction, the main interest of the people was the conversation of their neighbours.

The enquiry desk man handed me the message awaiting me, in my name. It was a telegram which I brought to the car, and read. "Come."

Karl told me the small village called Dassow from where the telegram was sent lay on the Baltic coast. It was a border point of the Soviet zone near Luebeck in the British zone. He asked: "Would you care to go there?"

"If possible!"

"I can take you there. It is only three hours drive and I own a permit for the Eastern zone."

"Let us decide in the morning", I said, and asked him to return to the West sector.

The pension where I had reserved my room was next to Cafe Wien. It was in the heart of the city, but lying down in bed I had a feeling as if I was on a ship at sea.

In the latter part of the night there was a great storm.

Chapter V

THE COASTAL LIGHT

I

NEXT DAY TOWARDS AFTERNOON we drove to the Baltic coast. Our papers said we were on a transit to the Western zone. Karl humoured the East zone guard: "Off fishing some sea-princesses!"

"No war over Venus and Helenas!", the young People's police smiled. "Advise smuggling." There were no more checks.

A fresh and strong breeze blew on the strand. Some furious waves rose high and struck the swelling dunes. Long way from the shore a sailing boat glided over the water receding further and further towards the misty infinity. The beach looked deserted.

By the directions given at the village guest-house where Karl waited with the car, I tried to locate Gloria's tent by the sea. First, I bumped against a fisherman's shack. It was stuffy and smelt of fish. The owner, a middle aged, sat there on an upturned barrel mending his net. His tattered clothes and weather-beaten face was typical of the inhabitants on this part of the coast. He directed me further on to a lonely spot behind a huge sand dune.

II

While reaching her, my feet sank deep in the golden sand. She had the same clothes on as she wore in Vienna. At the moment looking towards the darkening horizon, she seemed to be wandering in a far-away land. I could imagine Iphigenia at the time of her ill-fated wedding.

My presence seemed to shake her up into life. I asked her: "And Enrico?"

"He pushed me out here yesterday."

"But why?"

"Since I belong to the degenerate capitalist society, he has sworn he would never see me again."

"Could he not tolerate co-existence?"

"No, he is going to give a death blow to the present regime and society of Italy."

"But this could not account for ending your friendship?"

"No, you are right; it is not the communist philosophy of life; it is Ushi."

"Who is this Ushi?"

"The Viennese girl you know. He says she is the most beautiful being in the world. From her first gaze he has fallen in love with her."

"It cannot be. She stands no comparison with you."

"Anyhow, she is the girl who has turned him into a lifelong agent of the Soviets. She is extremely clever."

"But why did she take you to Berlin?"

"For two reasons. Firstly, she wanted to show me her victory over Enrico, and secondly, she thought this humiliation could turn me also into a Soviet

agent. This is her job for which she is so highly paid."

"How dangerous!"

"She has left me no other alternative. Either I return to Italy as a Soviet agent or I rot here in East Germany, may be very soon in a concentration camp."

"What have you decided?"

"My world seems to have suddenly transformed into a disgusting hell. Their intimacy has seized me with a frenzied rage. Never before have I been possessed by such an infernal demon."

"You must overcome it", said I, helping her to stand up.

"But where can I go?", she hesitated. "My travel papers for East Germany are with them. They have threatened that without accepting their terms if I tried to cross borders they would denounce me to the Soviet occupation authorities as an American spy."

"Ignore this threat", trying to encourage her I said, and led her towards the fisherman's shack where Karl too had come in our search.

"What a shame!" Karl said when I explained the matter to him. "These local communists are worse than the Russians. I am sure, the present Soviet leadership must be against such pattern of work on the traditions of Beria. But she must escape."

"Can it be made possible?" I asked him.

"Why not? Hundreds of people cross the Eastern borders to go over to the West." He turned to the fisherman with certain propositions, but the man repeated everytime—"Verboten" (it is prohibited). Karl took him aside, patted him on the back and offered him fifty West marks in cash and another fifty West marks to be paid by me on reaching the

Western zone at Travemuende. The fisherman changed his tone, and asked me: "Do you know how to spread nets?"

"I do."

"It will not get tangled?"

"Of course not."

"And you can fold it evenly?"

"O, yes."

"Then, come along." Showing me a boat a little further away he said: "We shall go fishing. Let us put the sails on, it will take us quicker."

While we were fixing up sails, Floria climbed into the barge. The fisherman told her to take cover. She slipped from the seat to the bottom of the boat and curled up as if she was fast asleep.

Karl promised to meet us at Travemuende. The sails caught wind, and the boat shot off like an arrow. Towards the West.

III

The sea turned choppy. Waves rolled up to the edge of the boat and played with it. The stern rose and fell which swung us from side to side. The distance seemed to be considerable. But the fisherman assured us: "The mouth of the Trave is not very wide. We must be seeing land soon."

The rosy hue of the West had disappeared. The horizon seemed to be enveloped in gloom. But very soon, we could discern a glimmering light.

Reaching the shore, our boat slipped on to the beach. We jumped out and pulled it on to dry sand as far as we could. A little further ahead on the strand Karl greeted us: "Now, you can begin life anew."

He had to fix up some business at Hamburg which was less than an hour's drive through the "autobahn." Late that evening we were deposited in a pension overlooking the Alster lake. We felt the change of atmosphere. The air was really free and refreshing.

IV

Often have I decided my future course by looking at the morning clouds. Today they bathed in the Alster coloured in the first golden rays. It looked very much like the midnight sun on a lake in the Arctic region.

There was a soft knock at the door and the landlady entered with some coffee and newspapers in a tray. I unfolded the upper one and read in huge letters:

"TERRIFIC FLOODS IN NORTH BIHAR MILLIONS WITHOUT SHELTER"

This was my constituency. The news decided my programme—"Immediate return." An hour later Floria too told me her morning guidance was to return to Venice and face the music. She had still enough money left to reach home. Examining my pockets I realised that I had now left only enough to reach Switzerland. How was I going to get a plane ticket to Bombay? Now that was the question.

Then I had an idea. To a travel agent friend in Genève, I talked on phone and asked him to arrange my passage. A couple of hours later I received his telegram: "Catch tomorrow's plane."

In great excitement, we caught the first train and travelled together upto Montreux. Here we came to

the parting of the ways and we wanted to celebrate. A musician friend stayed here who had extended an invitation to visit him when I passed that way. He played for us some classic in his own style.

V

His fingers ran over the stringed instrument. It seemed, we saw a picture. Bitter cold. It is raining. Floods. There are thousands of people in the streets. They jostle. Fight for shelter. The gates are closed. More rain. Floods create havoc. They knock. Knock. A third knock. Strong gust of wind opens the gates wide. They enter a hall. All are under shelter. They embrace one another.

“Do you understand?”, the musician turned to us. “Once Beethoven composed the ninth symphony with the blood of his heart. He has shown us the way. Based on that, why not compose a new piece which will give us courage to live and the belief that in spite of all these wars, troubles and tears—the human heart will survive.”

A batch of young men dived into the lake. We were splashed. The musician repeated: “Yes, a new music to survive.”

VI

Light and shade played in the sky. Trains departing for opposite directions waited. We lowered the windows, promised to correspond, and looked into each other's eyes, shy no longer, now that we were parting. Slowly we were parted as the trains moved on. Small were the chances of our meeting again. We had not even taken each other's full name and address.

Then only I realised the effects of a mysterious attraction. Without understanding why, I felt a strange emptiness. Outside the window a number of images fluttered over the romantic lake Lemman. Mont Blanc was hidden behind them in dark clouds.

Autumn had set in at Genève in earnest. A thick cloud floated over the lake. Heavy mist descended upon the city. Snow had fallen on the mountains. My Swiss friend asked me: "What are you doing here? You must return to your constituency."

I took the night plane home. We soared high into the sky. Once above the white clouds it was moonlight. The bald majestic head of Mont Blanc approached quite near to bid us "bon voyage".

Sleepy, with eyes half-closed, I leaned back in a corner of the plane. It was quite a different world I landed in, something like an opera scene. With accompaniment of Chopin's music, half Aphrodite, half Madonna faced figures danced the advent of spring before the "Primavera" of Botticelli in Florence. Remarkable were the movements and the eyes of the central figure. Floria would invariably have called it "Venus and the Maiden."

Stoppages at Rome, Cairo and Basra were short. My contact with the images of the people I met during the trip was not blotted out. It lasted also during the long night flight over the Persian Gulf and the Arabian sea.

At dawn the air hostess woke me up with—"Bombay ae", in my own language.

A pale and tender coast was in sight. The waves splashed noisily. They rose high for resurrection and a new Light.

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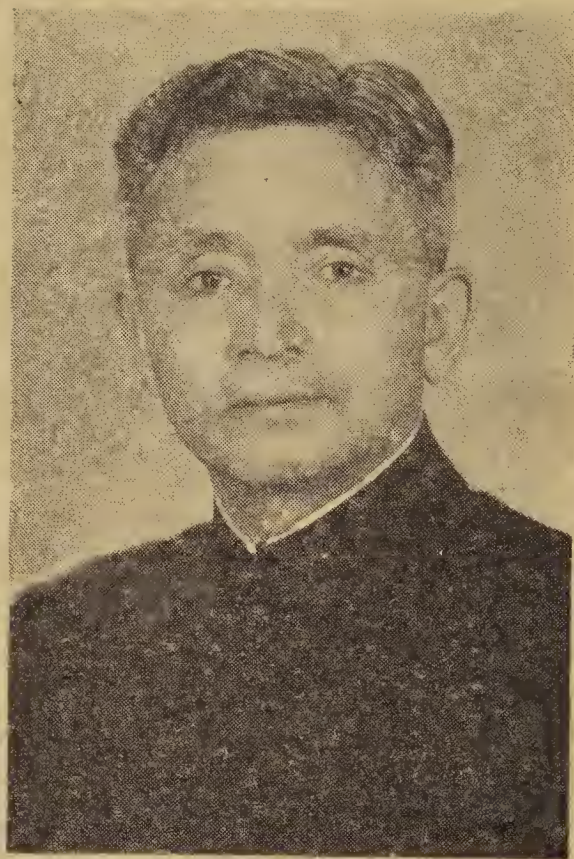
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Few Indians can claim to have such a colourful life as Dr. SATYANARAYAN SINHA. Leaving India at the age of sixteen, one finds him as a stow-away on a Norwegian boat, drilling with the Uzbeks and the Mongols in the Soviet Tundras, taking Doctorate from a German University, fighting Italians in Ethiopia, wandering with Lamas in Tibet, in prison as a fighter for Indian Freedom; then working as Independent India's First Secretary in Switzerland, admiring a "Jirga" in Pakhtoonistan; and now, exploring in his own way from the Andamans to the Arctics as a Member of the Indian Parliament.

Born forty-five years ago on the banks of the Ganges in North Bihar, Satyanarayan had a short stay at Gandhiji's Ashram and Gurudev Tagore's Santiniketan before his studies at Kashi Vidyapith. His first book — "The Revolt of Asia" in Hindi was proscribed. He had the blessings of Gurudev for his book on Russia. And it was Gorki who made it possible for Dr. Sinha to live in Russia as a Russian.

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